

Vicarious Trauma and Compassion Fatigue in Workplace Investigators

By Kenneth McCarthy, co-authored by Katherine Snow



It's a complicated relationship, the one between an investigator and the parties to the investigation. You aren't a friend, you aren't family. You need to be empathetic, but is there such a thing as too much empathy? Depending on the investigation, you may spend hours, days, or weeks talking to that person.

You may learn about their family, their children, their partner, their workplace, their insecurities, their fears, their transgressions, they may joke, they may cry. Whatever happens, even if it is just a formal chat, you may have built a rapport with them, or at the very least, an insight into what makes them tick.

So when I learned that one of the people I interviewed as part of a workplace investigation died two weeks after our interview, I was knocked off my feet. The news of their death had a significant impact on me for more than eight weeks.

I didn't have a word for the way I felt when I heard the news of the individual's death. It was an unexpected death, meaning there did not appear to be any pre-existing physical conditions at play. I didn't process it right away. I explained to my team what had happened and how we would proceed with the file.

Then, for a couple of weeks, I couldn't do much. I got through the day, and carried on with interviews and report writing for other cases. Suddenly about a month after hearing the news, I woke up thinking about the person and I hit a point where I couldn't do anything related to investigations.

I could do things in my personal life; with friends, family, networking, you name it. But, when it came to sitting in front of an-

other interviewee, analyzing evidence, listening to an interview recording, or writing an investigation plan or report, I was done. I couldn't do it, and the funny thing is, I didn't even realize that I was frozen. One day of no progress turned into another day and then another day and then a week and then I found myself looking back at eight weeks that I could not account for.

Fortunately, when I realized that I was falling into a bad place, I was able to contact a therapist and to lean on my team and my family. But it took me those eight weeks, what felt like a very long time, to realize that I needed the help.

Part of what made it difficult for me to realize that I needed help processing what happened was the fact that investigators are not exactly first responders to bad situations—we often come into play later in the game, maybe even years after the first incident has taken place.

Investigators are typically secondary or tertiary responders. We get to the scene months or years after the fact to help determine what happened and build a plan forward. We have to speak to the people who experienced or witnessed the incident and hear about it from all angles.

While we are focused on conducting trauma-informed interviews, we as investigators can experience a traumatic event through processing the victim's re-telling of the event. This processing of someone else's trauma can lead to compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma.

The Difference between Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma

Compassion fatigue was coined “to describe the phenomenon of stress resulting from exposure to a traumatized individual rather than from exposure to the trauma itself.” (Cocker)

Compassion fatigue is often an affliction of care providers such as health care, emergency or community workers. But it can also result from investigating a traumatic incident after the fact.

The compassion and empathy that care givers have to provide is mentally and emotionally taxing. Essentially, “exposure to patients or clients experiencing trauma or distress can negatively impact professional’s mental and physical health, safety and wellbeing, as well as that of their families, the people they care for, and their employing organizations.” (Cocker).

Vicarious trauma has been defined as a “permanent transformation in the inner experience of the therapist that comes about as a result of empathetic engagement with clients’ trauma material.” (Jenkins & Baird). Repeated engagement with traumatic material permanently changes your “cognitive schema” which is the way your brain interprets and organizes information.

So while compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma have similar root causes, they differ in how they manifest and how treatable they are.

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My Experience with Compassion Fatigue and Trauma

Compassion fatigue is often described as the “cost of caring for others in emotional pain.” (Figley, 82) What we do as investigators when we hear recounts of traumatic experiences is “secondary exposure,” and it can have a devastating emotional effect on us.

I have experienced compassion fatigue in the past. It can be incredibly difficult to hear someone recount what could be the worst days of their life. For me, it felt increasingly difficult to hear similar stories over and over again. As investigators, we can hope for better, but year after year, similar interpersonal problems persist and present themselves in our cases.

What I experienced with the death of the person I interviewed felt different than my experiences of compassion fatigue.

Vicarious trauma is trickier; it can change the way our brains function and lead to serious issues for investigators. That sounds pretty scary. What can we do to overcome it, to prevent it?

Preventing Vicarious Trauma and Compassion Fatigue
Some of the emotions in a workplace investigation interview can be described as transference (the interviewee’s emotional reaction towards the investigator) and countertransference (the investigator’s emotional reaction to the interviewee.) It is important for us to be aware of our emotional reactions in interviews and what tends to trigger that emotional reaction. We have to be mindful of whether we are projecting ourselves or our experiences into the interviewee’s story.

As investigators, we study how to approach the interviewee gently and how not to re-traumatize or trigger anyone. This applies whether we are interviewing a complainant or principal party, a respondent or responding party, or a witness or bystander. Each has their own version of the events and the emotional burdens that come with it. We create boundaries for the conversation, and how we will approach difficult topics and allow for breaks in heavy conversations.

What about boundaries for us?

We need to set emotional boundaries for our interviews (such as balancing how empathetic and sympathetic we can afford to be). It is a delicate dance. Each investigator needs to reflect on what may be a trigger and what needs to be in place before we conduct an interview. Once we have been able to identify what is triggering to us and what boundaries we need to set for interviews, we need to set those boundaries and make sure they are respected. Allow the same breaks, kindness and understanding for ourselves that we regularly extend to interviewees for ourselves.

The Importance of a Support Network in Building a Better Future

Self-care is such an essential part of our job as investigators. Caring for ourselves is part of our jobs, and should be built into our calendars as often as it is needed.

Taking time between heavy cases or taking breaks from difficult report writing is one strategy. Working with mental health

professionals and creating strategies for caring for oneself is another.

What has worked for me is:

- talking openly about the impacts of investigations on my mental health with my team members and other investigators, encouraging them to do the same meeting monthly with a therapist
- making space for other priorities at our organization (building prevention training courses, developing tools for accurate workplace assessments, and writing articles to share our knowledge and experience)
- leaning on my local AWI chapter and network

I am passionate about prevention solutions. I founded my company with the goal of improving how workplace investigations are conducted, but the best case scenario is that an incident never happens at all.

An incident of violence and harassment at work can be absolutely devastating for everyone involved. It can completely sink a workplace, cause staff to lose all trust in their employer and leave in droves; it can ruin lives. The ripple effect of the incident can be so broad that it impacts an organization and investigators like us years down the road.

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I'm grateful to do the type of work I do, and I am glad that I have the personal experience with workplace investigations to better understand the needs of my clients.

We know that the work we do is so important. Our reporting and recommendations protect future staff and build workplaces that resolve incidents of harassment and violence and prevent future incidents from happening.

This can be a rewarding but very difficult job. After the experiences I've had with compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma, my suggestion is to take care of yourselves and your team.



Ken McCarthy (he/him) is the President of Integrity by McCarthy. Ken retired from the Canadian Public Service in 2020 and created Integrity by McCarthy to raise the bar in how organizations deal with matters of workplace harassment, violence, wrongdoing and fraud. He has seen the devastating consequences on individuals and organizations and set out to make a difference. Ken has led a workplace investigation program for a workforce of over 15,000 employees. He has also provided executive oversight in more than 500 workplace investigations and has designed and delivered investigation training sessions to 500 front-line managers. Ken is based in Ottawa, Ontario.



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