



A Lawyer's Guide for Recognizing and Coping With Vicarious Trauma

BY SOO DAWSON

Lawyers are at heightened risk of experiencing vicarious trauma, also referred to as secondary trauma, due to their regular exposure to trauma survivors and traumatic content.¹ Repeated exposure to traumatized clients, disturbing testimony, or graphic images or recordings can invoke strong emotions, such as fear, terror, or horror. Over time, this professional exposure may contribute to symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), even when the lawyer has not directly experienced the traumatic event.

Vicarious trauma differs from ordinary stress or burnout. While stress and burnout are often related to workload and job demands, trauma responses arise from exposure to events

that threaten a person's sense of self, safety, and survival.² Trauma responses are often accompanied by profound feelings of despair, fear, or helplessness. Research has recognized repeated professional exposure to traumatic experiences as a potential pathway to PTSD.

Not all lawyers exposed to trauma will develop vicarious trauma. However, certain factors may increase susceptibility, including practicing in areas of law that are marked by more conflict or systemic injustices, such as criminal, family, immigration, asylum, or military law. Lawyers who have their own trauma histories, or who are currently experiencing personal psychosocial stressors, such as divorce or illness, may also be at greater risk. Furthermore, individual characteristics,

including personality, cultural background, and early experiences, can influence how lawyers respond to repeated exposure to trauma.³

Signs and Symptoms

Common signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma and PTSD include:

- **Intrusive symptoms**, such as repeated, disturbing, and unwanted memories, nightmares, flashbacks, or strong physical reactions to reminders of the stressful experience. These experiences can be highly distressing and cause lawyers to isolate or forcibly suppress trauma-related thoughts and feelings. While avoidance and suppression may bring short-term relief, they often exacerbate symptoms over time by preventing trauma processing and reducing the likelihood of seeking support, both of which are essential for recovery.
- **Avoidance of trauma-related thoughts, feelings, or reminders**, including people, places, situations, or work materials that are associated with the stressful experience but do not otherwise threaten personal safety and well-being. While short-term avoidance is a natural response to distressing events, chronic avoidance leads to diminished capacities to cope with stress and sustains PTSD symptoms, leading to diminished scope of professional and personal functioning. For example, avoiding certain case files or skipping meetings may relieve pressure in the moment but often increases workplace pressures and stress over time.
- **Negative changes in mood and cognition**, including difficulty experiencing positive emotions such as joy, happiness, and connection; feeling detached from others; or experiencing persistent feelings of anger, guilt, shame, or horror. Lawyers may become increasingly irritable or impatient, perceiving others to be "out of touch" or unable to understand their experiences. For example, "John," a criminal defense attorney, describes feeling cut off and angry at his spouse when she complains about her relatively

trivial problems at work. He finds it difficult to relax and experience enjoyment at home, which places stress on their relationship.

- **Heightened arousal and reactivity**, including hypervigilance, exaggerated startle response, difficulty concentrating, or insomnia. During periods of sustained hyperarousal, lawyers are more prone to engaging in reckless, impulsive, or self-destructive behavior and coping strategies. Research on lawyer well-being shows that lawyers often prioritize professional obligations at the expense of their own health, with elevated rates of overwork, poor sleep, inadequate exercise, and problematic alcohol or drug use.⁴ As a result, lawyers experiencing vicarious trauma benefit from greater attention to healthy coping regimens.

Coping With Emotions of Vicarious Trauma

Individuals with vicarious trauma may experience some or all the symptoms of PTSD, which causes significant amounts of emotional distress and dysregulation. If you recognize signs of vicarious trauma in yourself, consider these five coping mechanisms to proactively address emotions and reduce symptoms.

1. Avoid habitual emotion suppression.

Emotion suppression refers to the conscious effort to disengage from or inhibit the expression of emotions to minimize the impact of unwanted emotions, such as shame, fear, horror, or anger. It can stem from a desire to be socially appropriate or appear strong.⁵ Examples of emotional suppression include acting unbothered by a disturbing case outcome or saying, “It’s fine,” when the situation is actually causing distress.

Although emotion suppression is a common strategy used in professional settings, habitual reliance on it is associated with lower levels of physical and mental well-being, higher levels of reported distress, and a lower quality of life.⁶ Instead of defaulting to suppression, practice naming emotions internally and acknowledging their validity. For example, get in the habit of saying to yourself, “It makes sense I’m feeling [insert emotion].” Naming and validating emotions in this way can strengthen emotional awareness and reduce the tendency to suppress difficult feelings.

2. Practice daily mindfulness and emotion-focused meditation.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, often dubbed the father of the modern mindfulness movement, defines mindfulness as “awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present

moment, non-judgmentally.”⁷ Mindfulness, including meditation, does not require extraordinary effort or formal training. It can be cultivated with curiosity throughout the workday by observing your own emotional reactions without judgment.

For example, taking a few minutes to express curiosity about what made you feel angry during the last client interaction is a form of mindfulness. As you reflect, resist the urge to label your emotions as good, bad, appropriate, or inappropriate. Instead, simply notice them with openness and curiosity.

A brief meditation can further strengthen emotional awareness and resilience. Sit comfortably, place a hand gently over your heart, close your eyes, and bring your attention to your breath. As emotions arise, acknowledge them without judgment, allowing each feeling to come and go naturally over the course of a few minutes.

3. Practice emotion regulation by setting boundaries.

Consider creating a “releasing ritual” in which you identify the strong emotions from the workday, make note of them, and imagine putting them inside a sealed container or box. The releasing ritual can be symbolic rather than literal, but the point of having one is to practice



To promote well-being, resiliency, and competency throughout Colorado’s legal community.

The Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) is the free, confidential, and independent program for Colorado’s legal community. COLAP offers free well-being consultations for: Stress & Burn-out * Secondary Trauma & Compassion Fatigue * Work-life balance * Free ethics CLE presentations * Improving well-being in the workplace * Personal or professional issues * Mental health, trauma, substance use, or addiction concerns * Referrals to resources.

303-986-3345 | email: info@coloradolap.org | www.coloradolap.org

All calls and emails are confidential.

setting boundaries around highly distressing emotions so they do not become all-consuming.

If distressing emotions do seep in at 2 a.m., restore safety and control by saying, “There’s no resolution to this at 2 a.m. Thoughts and feelings at 2 a.m. are different from those experienced during the day. I’ll address this tomorrow.”

Other reminders that can help with emotion regulation include: “I’m only here to walk through this for a short time with my clients,” or “This feeling is temporary.” These reminders can help maintain emotional balance and reduce the likelihood of emotional overwhelm or dysregulation.

Setting boundaries is different from suppressing emotions. Boundary setting is a proactive and intentional way to exercise greater emotional control, while emotion suppression attempts to avoid or deny them altogether. To be most effective, boundary setting needs to be paired with healthy outlets and emotional processing.

4. Find healthy outlets and support for emotional processing.

Lawyers working in higher conflict environments or those who experience personal vulnerabilities may be at greater risk for vicarious trauma. Trauma-informed workplaces recognize that vicarious trauma is common, maintain clear protocols and resources, and provide appropriate training and support.⁸

However, many lawyers work in environments that, intentionally or unintentionally, prioritize high workloads, billing targets, and competitive or adversarial structures⁹ over lawyer well-being. Acknowledging and processing distress in these settings can feel overwhelming, especially since symptoms of vicarious trauma often exceed typical coping capacities.

In situations like these, consider turning to a therapist, trusted colleague, or mentor for support and validation. Beyond validation, a licensed therapist trained in trauma processing can help identify and address personal susceptibilities and stressors related to vicarious trauma, build healthy coping strategies, and reduce the intensity of distressing thoughts and feelings associated with trauma exposure.

5. Increase experiences of positive emotions.

Just as habitual emotional suppression decreases well-being, vicarious trauma can make it difficult or impossible to experience emotions like happiness, satisfaction, or love, thereby reducing overall life satisfaction. In their book *The Happy Lawyer: Making a Good Life in the Law*, Levit and Linder note that lawyer happiness is shaped more by autonomy, competence, and relatedness than by status or money.¹⁰ These principles can be applied to help mitigate the effects of vicarious trauma and increase positive feelings.

Setting and sticking to a ratio of trauma-heavy cases to non-heavy ones is one example of leveraging autonomy to establish a healthier balance. To build competence, or a sense of mastery, becoming educated about the impacts of trauma on mental and physical health for both lawyers and clients, and practicing in a trauma-informed way, can help create lasting

change. Lastly, relatedness may involve connecting with like-minded colleagues, policymakers, or professionals in other disciplines (e.g., mental health, social work, or law enforcement) to address the systemic impacts of vicarious trauma and reduce isolation.

Conclusion

Trauma means “wound” in Latin, and in this sense, experiencing traumas, whether big or small, is a normal part of the human experience. In the context of vicarious trauma, however, exposure to the deep wounds of others can cause lawyers to develop their own emotional wounds, overwhelming their capacity to use their usual coping mechanisms. During such times, it is important to reach out for support from loved ones, trusted colleagues, mental health professionals, or the Colorado Lawyer Assistance Program (COLAP) to facilitate healing and restore vitality. 

Soo Dawson, PsyD, is a licensed clinical psychologist in Colorado and private practice owner. Her specialties include treatment of PTSD and vicarious trauma, career stress and burnout, medico-legal evaluations, and personality assessments. Dr. Dawson applies psychological principles to legal issues and is passionate about working with forensic clients, the Colorado legal community, and victim advocacy—drsoodawson.com.

Coordinating Editor: Elizabeth Lembo, COLAP executive director—elembo@coloradolap.org

For more well-being related strategies, visit the COLAP website at www.coloradolap.org. Or contact COLAP at info@coloradolap.org or (303) 986-3345 to request a free, confidential well-being consultation.

NOTES

1. Laster et al., “Vicarious Trauma, Burnout, Psychological Flexibility, and Self-Care Among Forensic Psychology Expert Witnesses,” 71 *J. Forensic Sci.* 132 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.70206>.
2. James, “Towards Trauma-Informed Legal Practice: A Review,” 27(2) *Psychiatry, Psych. and L.* 275 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13218719.2020.1719377>.
3. *Id.*
4. *Id.*
5. Levasseur et al., “The Cost of ‘Being Strong’: Exploring the Relationship Between Emotional Suppression and Wellbeing,” 6(1) *J. of Happiness and Health* 34 (2026), <https://doi.org/10.47602/johah.v6i1.141>.
6. *Id.*
7. <https://www.mindful.org/jon-kabat-zinn-defining-mindfulness>.
8. James, *supra* note 2.
9. Verney, “Lessons on Vicarious Trauma and Wellbeing From a Royal Commission,” 41 *Law Soc’y J.* 26 (Feb. 1, 2018), <https://lsj.com.au/articles/lessons-on-vicarious-trauma-and-wellbeing-from-a-royal-commission>.
10. Levit and Linder, *The Happy Lawyer: Making a Good Life in the Law* (Oxford University Press 2010).