

## Vicarious Trauma

Few people in the general community understand the complex occupation of sign language interpreting. Demands placed upon interpreters, in addition to linguistic demands, include environmental, interpersonal and intrapersonal considerations.

It can be difficult for interpreters to fully recognise the development of vicarious trauma as they interpret in emotionally charged settings such as mental health consultations (diagnostic and ongoing), legal appointments, court appearances (Children's, Family, Magistrates, District etc), police interviews, and the range of general medical appointments.

Close and prolonged work in settings where the interpreter is repeatedly exposed to crises of various kinds can have serious psychological consequences for the interpreter. Examples of such crises are:

- interpreting an abusive interaction between family members in a counselling situation
- conveying the doctor's prognosis that the patient has only months to live
- assisting a police officer and medical staff communicate with a person who has been raped - can have serious psychological consequences for the interpreter.

Not only is information interpreted often very sensitive and linguistically challenging, the interpreter has to deal with their own emotions and how they react automatically to the situation at hand.

The following is a quote from a paper written by Carmen Valero-Garces - Emotional and Psychological Effects on Interpreters in Public Services.

"Experts also consider three levels at which the signs of being under psychological or emotional impact are visible. These levels are: physiological, cognitive, and affective. The most perceptible signs on a physiological level-as all of us probably know-are high blood pressure, chest pains, headaches or backaches, nausea, etc. which can be accompanied by antisocial behavior, insomnia, a change in appetite, consumption of alcohol, tranquilizers, and other drugs. At the cognitive level, the most perceptible signs are confusion, bewilderment, paranoia, feelings of guilt, suicidal tendencies, or recurring thoughts, lack of concentration, etc. At the affective level, the most perceptible signs are: sadness, anxiety, irritability, fear, and shock.

The consequences derived from working in these strong emotional contexts are also categorized into three types: those related to the profession itself, to the workplace, or outside the workplace.

In the professional context, emotional alterations can produce the psychotherapeutic transference-counter-transference phenomenon, anxiety

and stress, mistaken perceptions, heart problems, as well as the burnt-out syndrome (which include symptoms such as disillusion, lack of motivation, apathy, physical and mental exhaustion, loss of energy, and frustration). In the workplace, the consequences are: increased absenteeism, a tendency to leave the position and/or the organization, a smaller role at work, and a rise in interpersonal conflicts.

Outside the workplace, the consequences are often problems within the family relationships, isolation, and effects of the 'vicarious syndrome' ('vicarious traumatising'). Blair and Ramones (1996: 24) describe this phenomenon in the following way: "The endless stories of violence, cruelty, exploitation and atrocity; the emotional impact of experiencing another's terror, pain and anguish; and the continual exposure to the darkest aspects of the human condition can produce symptoms strikingly similar to the post-traumatic symptoms of their patients."

Interpreters need to be aware of the effect of vicarious trauma together with other related issues such as compassion fatigue, burnout and work stress.

Interpreters who are informed about vicarious trauma and who actively maintain a balanced personal and professional life are in the best position to provide an ongoing quality interpreting service with minimal risks to their emotional health.

More interpreter training in basic psychology regarding core concepts such as stress management, dealing with anxiety, understanding how empathy and self esteem can be effective 'tools' when faced with emotionally challenging situations, would assist interpreters maintain a healthy emotional state.

NICSS is aware of the very difficult and challenging interpreting situations interpreters have to deal with from time to time and has made provision for counselling and debriefing services for all NICSS contracted interpreters. The service available via Wesley Mission Brisbane is through an external organisation called [Davidson Trahaire Corpsych Employee Assistance Program](#). More information about this service can also be obtained by going to the NICSS website in the Interpreter area.