

Understanding How Vicarious Trauma Impacts Lawyers

Summary

During his career, District Attorney Michael J. Rourke has prosecuted numerous high-profile and violent cases, including first-degree murder, sexual assault, and crimes against children.

After prosecuting a notorious triple murder, Rourke recognized that it's not just victims who need support for their trauma, but legal professionals too.

Through the lens of his personal story, Rourke will explain how lawyers are impacted by vicarious trauma and the effect that not recognizing or ignoring this reality can have on one's physical and mental health.

In a town hall discussion moderated by Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism's Deputy Director, Stephanie Villinski, Rourke will be joined by Ellie Feldmann, a licensed clinical professional counselor, who will teach attendees how to recognize and cope with vicarious trauma throughout their careers.

Learning Objectives

Participants will be able to:

- a. Define what vicarious trauma is and recognize its signs and symptoms
- b. Understand how and why vicarious trauma affects attorneys
- c. Recognize how ignoring the impact of vicarious trauma can negatively impact an attorney's mental and physical well-being
- d. Learn strategies that attorneys can implement to navigate and diminish the impact of vicarious trauma

Outline

- I. Definition, signs, and symptoms of vicarious trauma
 - a. The [Cleveland Clinic defines vicarious trauma](#) as the experience of absorbing others' pain in times of their distress so deeply that it affects your own well-being
 - b. The signs and symptoms of vicarious trauma include:
 - i. Changes in mood
 - ii. Difficulty managing emotions
 - iii. Nightmares or having trouble sleeping

- iv. Excessive worrying
 - v. Not enjoying things one used to enjoy
 - vi. Being on high alert
 - vii. Negative impact on personal relationships
 - viii. Burnout
 - ix. Decreased job satisfaction
- II. People who are impacted by vicarious trauma
- a. Those who witness, hear about, or come close to others who have been impacted by tragedy, violence, etc.
 - i. First responders such as police and firefighters are examples typically referenced when discussing vicarious trauma
 - b. Lawyers and legal professionals are not immune to vicarious trauma
 - i. In his book *Vicarious Trauma and Burnout in Law*, Dr. Colin James asserts that lawyers often work closely with clients and witnesses who have traumatic backgrounds and experiences. This includes family law – which has high rates of domestic violence and child abuse – criminal law, refugee/asylum law, child protection, homelessness, and personal injury law
 - ii. While lawyers practicing in those areas of law may experience vicarious trauma more, all lawyers need to be aware of it
 - 1. A highly contentious contract negotiation or probate case can also impact lawyers
- III. Ignoring the impact of vicarious trauma can lead to mental and physical health issues
- a. Lawyers are trained to focus on the facts and issues of a case, but the client side of the case is real too
 - b. People typically come to lawyers at some of the lowest points in their lives
 - c. It's unrealistic to never be impacted by what the client is experiencing
 - d. If a lawyer ignores this impact, it can catch up with them in how they react to people and situations and their overall health
 - e. People may turn to abusing substances to offset the effects of vicarious trauma
- IV. Lawyers need strategies to deal with vicarious trauma because it is part of practicing law
- a. The answer is not to avoid traumatic cases

- b. The key is to find strategies that help to diminish the impact of vicarious trauma
- c. There are several strategies to manage vicarious trauma such as:
 - i. Taking regular breaks from work
 - ii. Exercise
 - iii. Meditation and prayer
 - iv. Talking with colleagues and mentors, keeping in mind attorney-client privilege and confidentiality
 - v. Reminding oneself why they do the work they do
 - vi. Peer support groups
 - vii. Breathing practices
 - viii. Setting appropriate and realistic boundaries with work and clients
 - ix. Processing any residual emotions and thoughts once a case is complete
- d. Lawyers may need to try several different strategies before finding what works best for them

Supplementary Resources

- Stephanie Villinski, [Understanding How Vicarious Trauma Impacts Lawyers](#), Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism (2025).
- American Bar Association, [Five Things Attorneys Should Know about Vicarious Trauma](#), American Bar Association.
- Megan Zwisohn, Wayne Handley, Danielle Winters, Alyssa Reiter, [Vicarious Trauma in Public Service Lawyering: How Chronic Exposure to Trauma Affects the Brain and Body](#), Richmond Public Interest Law Review (2019).
- North Carolina Association of Defense Attorneys, [Overcoming Vicarious Trauma for Legal Professionals](#), North Carolina Association of Defense Attorneys (2025).
- Judge Victor Reyes, [Vicarious Trauma Experienced by Judges and the Importance of Healing](#), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.
- Illinois Lawyers' Assistance Program Website, <https://illinoislap.org/>