

Protecting you while you save others:

Managing vicarious trauma for
transportation practitioners



Warnings regarding this presentation:

- Refers to death and serious injury.
- Includes images from fatal crash scenes.

Disclaimers:

- I am not a clinical psychologist.
- It's about transportation practitioners as people, but not our actual work.

Definition:

vicarious (adj) /vɪ'keə.ri.əs/

- experienced in the imagination through the feelings or actions of another person.
- performed, exercised, received, or suffered in place of another.

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About the presenter

Robert Swears:

- Technical Principal - Road Safety and Traffic Engineering.
- WSP Hamilton.
- NZCE (Civil), BE (Civil), MEngSc (Transp), CMEngNZ, CPEng, FEngNZ.
- 33 years and 12 days with WSP.



About the presentation

Road to Zero.

Every contact leaves a trace.

What is trauma?

PTSD and effect on practitioners.

WSP approach.



We have a vision
of zero deaths and serious
injuries

A vision where everyone, ... can get to
where they're going safely.

It might sound impossible, but
New Zealand has a plan to get there.
It's called Road to Zero.



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We have a vision
of zero deaths and serious
injuries

To get there, transportation
practitioners have to consider death
and serious injury on a daily basis.

Our day jobs involve talking about
people being killed and what we can do
to prevent that.



We have a vision
of zero deaths and serious
injuries

Our day job is not “normal”.

It’s unusual for people whose job is not
"people caring" focused to deal with
death and serious injury on a daily
basis.



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Preventing this is
our day job.

But every contact
leaves a trace.

Car v car.



We bring things with us to the scene and
we leave with things from the scene.

Another
contact,
another trace.

Car v truck.



Another
contact,
another trace.

Car v ute.



Another
contact,
another trace.

Car v truck.



Another
contact,
another trace.

Car v
pedestrian.



Another
contact,
another trace.

Truck v truck.



Another
contact,
another trace.

Car v van.



Another
contact,
another trace.

Car v car.



Another
contact,
another trace.

Car.



Another
contact,
another trace.

Bus.



Managing vicarious trauma for transportation practitioners

What is trauma?

- Psychological reaction resulting from a deeply distressing or disturbing experience.
- An event and your response to it.
- Trauma refers to your relationship with an event.



Trauma

How does trauma happen?

- How your brain processes emotional events.
- How traumatic events are remembered.
- Inability to forget.

Trauma

Categories of trauma include:

- Acute or single incident.
- Chronic or cumulative; we bring things with us to the scene (whether we attend in reality or virtually) and we leave with things from the scene.

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Trauma

Primary and secondary exposure to trauma:

- Primary; it happened to you.
- Secondary; also called "indirect" or "vicarious" trauma:
 - Bearing witness to traumatic events.
 - Listening to repeated stories about traumatic events.
 - Another contact, another trace; this is us.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

“Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event — either experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event.”

(Mayo Clinic)

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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

It isn't what's wrong with you. It's what's happened to you.

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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Can directly affect us and our colleagues; simply because of the work we do.



What WSP has done about the potential for PTSD

WSP has a “self-help” Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) in place, but so do most responsible employers.

EAP relies on employees asking for help.

We didn't identify an established “issue” to resolve; we identified a need to protect our people.



What WSP has done about the potential for PTSD

Four tier system established:

- Pre-exposure briefing.
- Network of senior "amateur" advisers.
- Incident resilience training sessions with registered clinical psychologist.
- Referrals; self-referred or recommended.



Pre-exposure briefing

Staff potentially exposed to vicarious trauma given briefing:

- Includes discussion about PTSD and that it's okay to not forget incidents.
- Guidance provided regarding access to "amateur" advisers and EAP.
- Included on list for next incident resilience training.

"Amateur" advisers

Senior staff that provide in-house support / and advice:

- Not experts, but have an understanding of PTSD and work being done by other staff.
- Geographically and demographically diverse.
- Available for discussion.
- Actively monitor staff and make referrals.



Group training

Training session with registered clinical psychologist experienced with emergency services PTSD:

- Usually about eight people per group.
- Aim is awareness / understanding regarding PTSD.
- Key output for participants is a Resilience Plan.

Referrals

Self or recommended:

- To clinical psychologist experienced dealing with emergency services type PTSD.
- Staff can ask to be referred.
- Staff can be offered a referral.
- Funding for referrals has never been declined.

Incident resilience training

To date (since 2019) we have provided incident resilience training for:

- 115 staff.
- 12 clients.
- 4 contractor partners.



Incident resilience training feedback

Anonymous solicited feedback has included:

- "Fantastic ... I wish I had known this years earlier."
- "... this was a valuable session ...".
- "... I like the idea of developing a monitoring and resilience plan ...".
- "It was good and very worthwhile."
- "... very relevant ...".



Incident resilience training feedback

Anonymous solicited feedback has included:

- "If I had known the signs ... I would probably still have been a full-time employee ...".
- "It was great ...".
- "The cumulative stress content is very relatable ...".
- "I am thankful we were given training in resilience ...".
- "... I was very impressed this training is being undertaken."

If our industry is serious about Road to Zero, we need to care for the practitioners

Road to Zero delivery practitioners:

- Are a critical part of delivering the vision.
- Will be exposed to vicarious trauma through their work.
- Need to be cared for at least as much as the people whose lives they are trying to save.

Managing vicarious trauma for transportation practitioners

The WSP approach:

- Provides a four tier system of awareness and care.
- Could be adopted by others.
- Involves putting focused effort into caring for our people.
- Seems to be working and is helping staff.



Managing vicarious trauma; is a bit like a seat belt

Usually you don't **need** it; and you hope you never do. But when it's required, it's there.



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Protecting you while you
save others:

Managing vicarious trauma for transportation
practitioners

The issues are real and need to be managed

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Questions?

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The logo for WSP, consisting of the lowercase letters 'w', 's', and 'p' in a bold, sans-serif font. The 'w' and 's' are connected, and the 'p' is positioned to the right of the 's'. The letters are white against a black background.