

Workplace Wellness Programmes

Evidence-based Mental Health Solutions
for Modern Teams

Fettle
THERAPY FOR ALL



Five Practical Strategies to Improve the Psychological Wellbeing of Content Moderators.

Content moderators do the challenging work necessary to keep the world safe as social media grows exponentially. Content moderators are the first responders of the internet, which presents the potential for harmful consequences for the individual.¹ Moderators typically work from 9-10 hours a day, 4-5 days a week. Repeated exposure to distressing content can lead to moderators experiencing vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma is a process of change that occurs when an individual is exposed to graphic or violent content, witnesses traumatic events, torture, or material relating that triggers their trauma history². Vicarious trauma can manifest physically and emotionally and affects an individual's perception of how they view the world, themselves, and others³.

¹Cambridge Consultants. (2019, July 18). *Use of AI in online content moderation*. Ofcom. Retrieved January 7, 2022, from https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/internet-and-on-demand-research/online-content-moderation/_nocache

² Baird, K., & Kracen, A. C. (2006) Vicarious traumatization and secondary traumatic stress: A research synthesis. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 19(2), 181-188.

³ Devilly, G. J., Wright, R., & Varker, T. (2009). Vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress or simply burnout? Effect of trauma therapy on mental health professionals. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 43(4), 373-385.

What happens to an employee and an organisation when vicarious trauma is left unaddressed?

Vicarious trauma left unaddressed can negatively impact your organisation. Vicarious trauma can affect an employee's functioning and performance at work, leaving them vulnerable to errors and mistakes on the job⁴.

If an organisation fails to establish and reinforce a trauma-informed culture within its workplace, this can lead to job dissatisfaction absenteeism and burnout in employees⁵. Vicarious trauma also affects the quality of the services your content moderators provide. By creating a supportive culture and promoting wellbeing practices you can increase your organisation's wellbeing⁶. Next, we will identify five concrete ways to lessen the influence and impact of vicarious trauma on your employees.

⁴ NCADV: *National Coalition Against Domestic Violence*. What Supervisors and Leadership Need to Know About Vicarious Trauma and Supporting Your Staff. (2022). Retrieved January 7, 2022, from <https://ncadv.org/blog/posts/what-supervisors-and-leadership-need-to-know-about-vicarious-trauma-and-supporting-your-staff>

⁵ Bengt B Arnetz, Eamonn Arble, Lena Backman, Adam Lynch, and Ake Lublin. 2013. Assessment of a prevention program for work-related stress among urban police officers. *International archives of occupational and environmental health* 86, 1 (2013), 79–88.

⁶ Middleton, Jennifer & Potter, Cathryn. (2015). The Relationship between Vicarious Trauma and Turnover among Child Welfare Professionals. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 9, 195-216.

How Organizations Can Diminish the Effects of Vicarious Trauma and Support Their Teams

Addressing vicarious trauma effectively will differ significantly depending on your organisation's resources. But no matter the size of your team, you can implement awareness about vicarious trauma and take action to show your staff and clients that you value their health and safety. By identifying the risks and applying strategies that limit the risk of the onset of mental health symptoms you will prepare workers to manage the impact of content and vicarious trauma simultaneously⁷.

1. Risk Mitigation

You can prevent the risk of vicarious trauma by applying strategies that equip the employee with the skills they need to cope before they begin viewing content. When we hear of preventative measures, we generally think of the medical community in the form of vaccinations to prevent illness⁸.

⁷ Steiger, M., Bharucha, T. J., Venkatagiri, S., Riedl, M. J., & Lease, M. (2021). The psychological well-being of content moderators. *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*.

⁸ Kisling, L. A., & M Das, J. (2021). Prevention Strategies. In *StatPearls*. StatPearls Publishing.

A meta-analysis by Tetrick & Winslow (2015), found that wellbeing intervention programmes effectively improved employee resilience, which is a protective buffer against vicarious trauma⁹. These interventions come in the form of psycho-education programmes. They are most effective when onboarding new content moderators to your team¹⁰. The sooner a worker is educated on vicarious trauma, the better they will be at managing potential risks. By creating and implementing regular vicarious trauma and wellness training in the workplace, you will remind your staff about its potential dangers. You will also refresh workers on proactive ways of addressing vicarious trauma, which will promote the safety and wellness of your entire team¹¹.

2. Carve out time for some fun

A study by Dosono & Semaan (2019) stated that '*distancing away from drama*' helped moderators cope more effectively at work¹². Being exposed directly or indirectly to trauma can leave teams feeling helpless, hopeless, and with a negative view of the world¹³. By offering staff members outlets to brighten up their workday, you will replenish their energy and increase their sense of optimism. Getting everyone together for a Trivia hour or a game of Pictionary during the workweek can improve staff morale and act as a circuit breaker from the stress of the ro

⁹ Tetrick, L. E., & Winslow, C. J. (2015). Workplace stress management interventions and health promotion. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 2, 583–603.

¹⁰ Joyce, S., Modini, M., Christensen, H., Mykletun, A., Bryant, R., Mitchell, P. B., & Harvey, S. B. (2016). Workplace interventions for common mental disorders: a systematic meta-review. *Psychological medicine*, 46(4), 683–697.

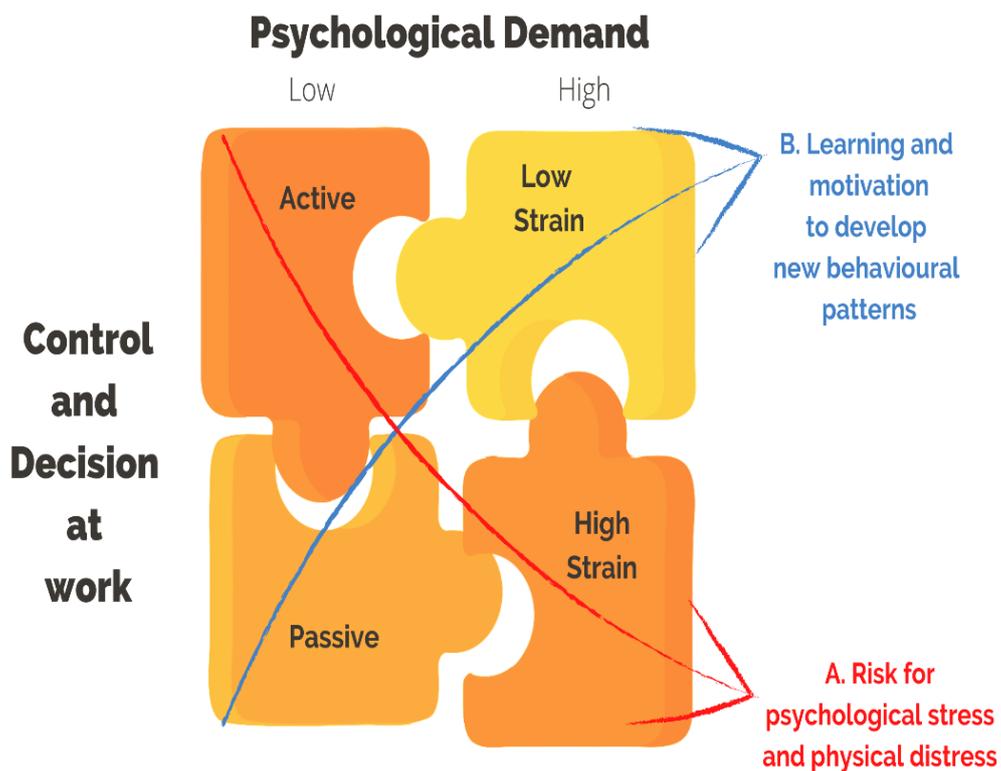
¹¹ NCADV: National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. What Supervisors and Leadership Need to Know About Vicarious Trauma and Supporting Your Staff. (2022). Retrieved January 7, 2022, from <https://ncadv.org/blog/posts/what-supervisors-and-leadership-need-to-know-about-vicarious-trauma-and-supporting-your-staff>

¹² Dosono, B., & Semaan, B.C. (2019). Moderation Practices as Emotional Labor in Sustaining Online Communities: The Case of AAPI Identity Work on Reddit. *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*.

¹³ NCADV: National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. What Supervisors and Leadership Need to Know About Vicarious Trauma and Supporting Your Staff. (2022). Retrieved January 7, 2022, from <https://ncadv.org/blog/posts/what-supervisors-and-leadership-need-to-know-about-vicarious-trauma-and-supporting-your-staff>

3. Equip Your Content Moderators with the skills needed to be successful in their role

Aside from viewing distressing content, moderators are required to meet high job demands, which can be better understood using Karasek and Theorell's demand-control model of risk factors (see Table 1 below).



Karaser and Theorell's demand control model of risk (1990)

Table 1. Karaser & Theorell's Demand Control Model of Risk (1990).

Such demands include accuracy goals, volume quotas, limited sense of control, autonomy, and recovery time. Content moderation requires high-performance demands coupled with a low sense of control which categorises it as high-stress occupation¹⁴. Interventions that improve personal power, mental wellbeing, self-efficacy, productivity, and self-esteem are needed to target the workplace stress experienced by content moderators¹⁵.

Furthermore, by providing access to in-house and external therapy services, workers in distress can focus on recovery and improve their mental health outcomes through working 1-1 with a therapist¹⁶. Therapists can also provide peer group support sessions for teams. Researchers Dosono & Semaan (2019), suggest content moderators benefit from '*building solidarity from shared struggles*' and '*empowering moderators through visible social support*'¹⁷. Peer group support builds connection and active learning in teams¹⁸. As moderators face similar challenges, talking about these struggles will help validate and normalise the feelings some workers may be having, especially when processing traumatic material.

Fettle offers a range of therapeutic and wellbeing services that provide staff with simple strategies for combatting stress and vicarious trauma. You can find out more information by visiting our website www.fettle.ie.



¹⁴ Steiger, M., Bharucha, T. J., Venkatagiri, S., Riedl, M. J., & Lease, M. (2021). The psychological well-being of content moderators. *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*.

¹⁵ Akbari, J., Akbari, R., Shakerian, M., & Mahaki, B. (2017). Job demand-control and job stress at work: A cross-sectional study among prison staff. *Journal of Education and Health Promotion, 6*.

¹⁶ Steiger, M., Bharucha, T. J., Venkatagiri, S., Riedl, M. J., & Lease, M. (2021). The psychological well-being of content moderators. *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*.

¹⁷ Dosono, B., & Semaan, B.C. (2019). Moderation Practices as Emotional Labor in Sustaining Online Communities: The Case of AAPI Identity Work on Reddit. *Proceedings of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*.

¹⁸ NCADV: National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. What Supervisors and Leadership Need to Know About Vicarious Trauma and Supporting Your Staff. (2022). Retrieved January 7, 2022, from <https://ncadv.org/blog/posts/what-supervisors-and-leadership-need-to-know-about-vicarious-trauma-and-supporting-your-staff>

4. Encourage the team to engage in self-care

Discussing self-care regularly in team meetings and offering specific ideas on how employees can integrate self-care into their daily lives will reinforce the importance of moderators' wellbeing. Moreover, carving out time in the workweek for team bonding activities will improve morale and promote safety and connection in the workplace¹⁹. Ideas include organising a short staff walk at lunchtime or meditation group at the end of the day. These are easy ways to encourage self-care for little to no cost. Even the smallest gestures can signal an organisation's commitment to their staff's wellbeing. Self-care has been found to increase employees' emotional and mental wellbeing and improve workplace performance²⁰. Engaging in regular self-care also targets vicarious trauma and lessens its effect on the employee²¹.



¹⁹ Burns, C. M., Morley, J., Bradshaw, R., & Domene, J. (2008). The Emotional Impact on and Coping Strategies Employed by Police Teams Investigating Internet Child Exploitation. *Traumatology*, *14*(2), 20–31.

²⁰ Harvard Business Review. (2021, November 15). *It's a new era for mental health at work*. Retrieved January 7, 2022, from <https://hbr.org/2021/10/its-a-new-era-for-mental-health-at-work>

²¹ Stockwell, Angie. (2017). Effectiveness of Self-Care in Reducing Symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress. Retrieved from Sophia, the St. Catherine University repository website: https://sophia.stkate.edu/msw_papers/797

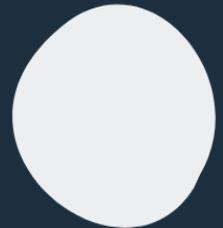
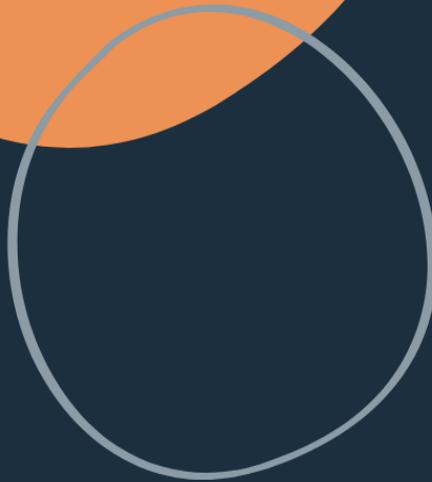
5. Create a bright and vibrant workplace:

A cost-effective way to improve wellbeing is by encouraging workers to decorate their workspaces²². It's easy to forget how the physical environment surrounding us impacts us throughout the workday. For example, swapping overhead fluorescent lights for subdued lamps creates a relaxing ambiance, depending on what the space requires. Invite the team to collaborate on the makeover fun by announcing at a staff meeting and brainstorming ideas. Encourage staff to hang up artwork and bring living plants in to transform the workspace. Employees can also hang up values and statements that underpin why they do this work. Values could include *'Keeping the World Safe'* or *'Protecting the Vulnerable.'*²³ These statements can gently remind workers why they chose this line of work and motivate them on a tough day.

In the wake of COVID-19, it has never been more critical for business and HR leaders to focus on the wellbeing of their teams head-on. Enterprise-ready, Fettle offers proven wellbeing programs that lead to healthier and happier organisations from the inside out. To find out more visit: www.fettle.ie.

²² NCADV: *National Coalition Against Domestic Violence*. What Supervisors and Leadership Need to Know About Vicarious Trauma and Supporting Your Staff. (2022). Retrieved January 7, 2022, from <https://ncadv.org/blog/posts/what-supervisors-and-leadership-need-to-know-about-vicarious-trauma-and-supporting-your-staff>

²³ Steiger, M., Bharucha, T. J., Venkatagiri, S., Riedl, M. J., & Lease, M. (2021). The psychological well-being of content moderators. *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*.



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