

Managing the risk of vicarious trauma

Vicarious trauma (indirect exposure to potentially traumatic events or materials) is a psychosocial hazard. WHS laws in South Australia require that psychosocial hazards such as vicarious trauma be managed using the hierarchy of risk controls.

Wherever feasible, measures to prevent or minimise the frequency, duration and severity of indirect exposure to potentially traumatic events or materials should be used. These preventative measures can be augmented with other measures to minimise harm to workers for whom some degree of exposure is unavoidable.

What is vicarious trauma?

Vicarious trauma is an umbrella term to describe both indirect trauma exposure – a work-related psychosocial hazard – and its resulting health impacts (risks).

Indirect exposure to potentially traumatic events (such as death or serious injury) and materials (such as digital images or verbal accounts of death and serious injury) poses a risk to the health of exposed workers, with the potential to cause Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and other conditions.

Such exposure is recognised by SafeWork SA as a psychosocial hazard by the description 'exposure to potentially traumatic events and materials'. This includes:

- indirect exposure to events that pose an immediate risk to the health or safety of people or animals;
- indirect exposure to natural disasters, or seriously injured or deceased persons or animals;
- reading, hearing or seeing accounts of potentially traumatic events, abuse or neglect;
- supporting victims or investigating potentially traumatic events, abuse or neglect; and
- witnessing, investigating or being exposed to potentially traumatic events or material.

A person is more likely to experience an event as potentially traumatic when it is unexpected, is perceived as uncontrollable or is the result of intentional cruelty.

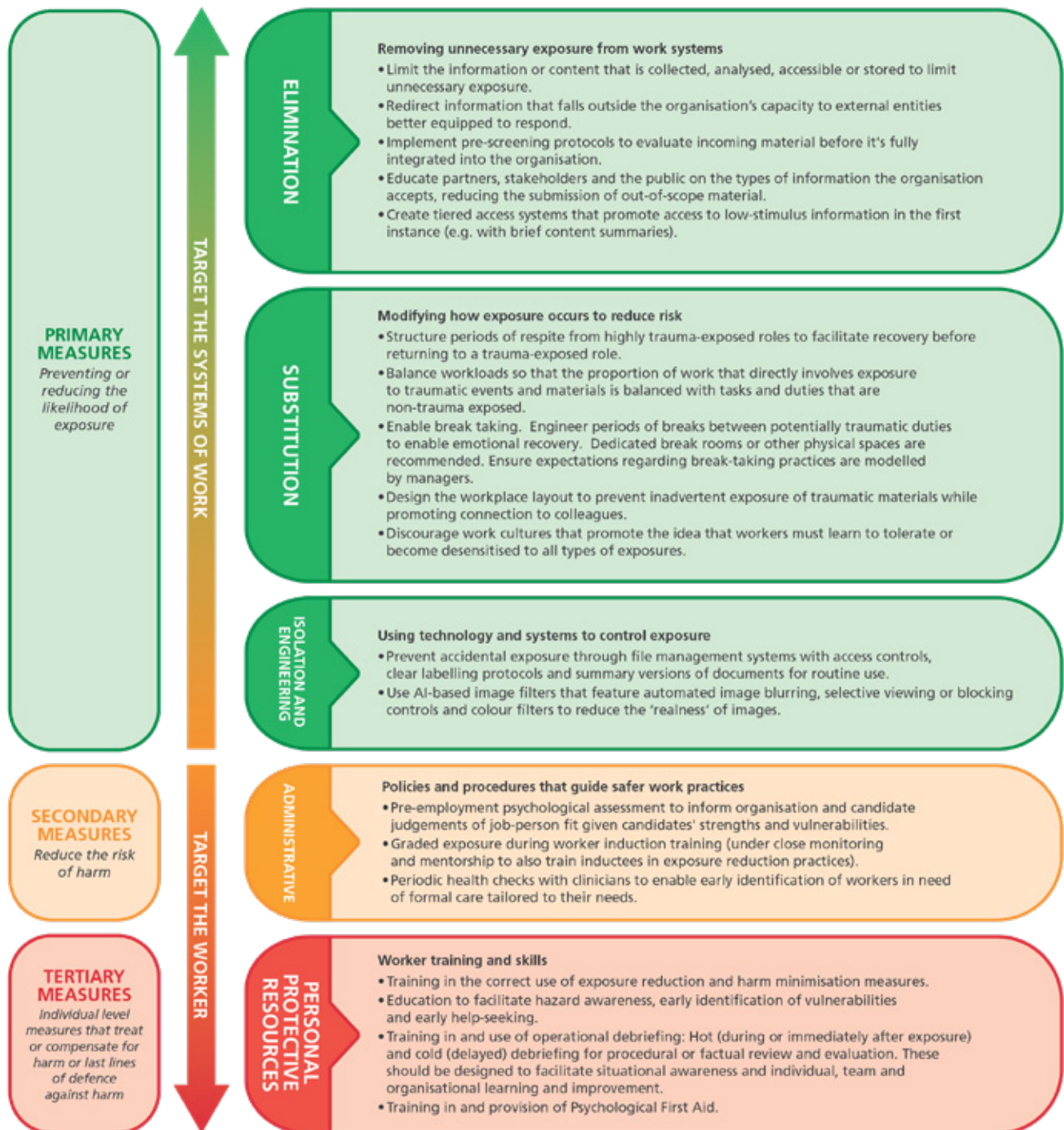
How should the risk of vicarious trauma be managed?

In many professions, eliminating vicarious trauma may not be possible. However, wherever feasible, primary prevention measures should be adopted to either minimise unnecessary exposure or alter the context of exposure to reduce the likelihood of serious harm. Options for primary prevention measures (elimination, substitution, isolation and engineering controls), secondary measures (administrative controls) and tertiary measures (personal protective resources) are outlined below. Following this guidance will protect your workers from the risk of harm and, enable you to meet your obligation to manage the risk of vicarious trauma using the hierarchy of controls.

Reference

Nicholas, A. (2025). [Mitigating vicarious trauma: Adopting an occupational safety approach](#). The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust.

HIERARCHY OF CONTROLS FOR MANAGING THE RISK OF VICARIOUS TRAUMA



SafeWork SA



See the [SafeWork SA website](https://www.safeworksa.gov.au) for more information about psychosocial risk management



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