

WASH your WEB: Rationale and Evidence

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SUMMARY: *What's this all about?*

Vicarious trauma in health care workers causes many problems. It is under-reported. Stigma, stoicism and other barriers inhibit the use of management-led or group interventions which may be helpful. "Wash your Web" is a preventative psychological tool to help individuals privately stave off vicarious trauma in themselves and could help overcome this situation. It is built upon four evidence-based principles: using compassion rather than empathy, using exposure techniques, using mature defence mechanisms, and using a bilateral stimulation technique. It involves a few seconds pre-shift and between cases, and a few minutes after-shift to process and release emotions. The tool is easy to learn and has the potential to alleviate distress in this urgent area.

BACKGROUND: *Do we really need a private psychological tool for vicarious trauma?*

One highly developed human trait, empathy, backfires on us when working with trauma and people. It causes distress; human emotions are highly contagious.¹ Listening to, treating, and being exposed to trauma and highly charged emotional situations invoke shock, grief, anger, fear or despair. Unprocessed, these strong emotions accumulate, cause vicarious trauma, and take their toll on health care. Typically, many individuals try to deny these emotions; they then fall into the trap of vicarious trauma.

Vicarious trauma is also known as secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, professional burnout or traumatoid states.² It leads to many well-documented problems: poor sleep, cynicism, absenteeism, loss of motivation, hopelessness, increased alcohol use, wanting to quit, mental illness (particularly PTSD and depression), and it adversely impacts family members and relationships.³ Aside from the work and the emotions, many things contribute to vicarious trauma: rapidly changing practices, a need for cultural sensitivity, more complex work, diverse patient needs, staff shortages, increased consumer demand, evolving technologies, longer shifts and workplace violence.⁴

DSM-5 specifically mentions health care workers who need to cope with trauma as part of criterion A for PTSD.⁵ Some of the PTSD criteria almost sets out the new norm for many health care workers: being upset at memories of trauma, avoiding reminders, being negative or cynical, being irritable and having poor sleep, and symptoms being chronic. Due to stigma, stoicism and fear of being stood down, loss of function (criterion G) may be kept hidden. It is safe to assume that vicarious trauma is under-reported.

Helpful interventions have been developed: engaging in debriefings,⁶ structured self-care,⁷ encouraging peer connections,⁸ formal psychotherapy, supervision, but all these are grossly under-utilised.⁹ Barriers hinder their implementation: time constraints, help-seeking seen as weakness, fear of losing a job, a culture of stoicism, and our ever-present busyness and over-commitment.¹⁰ Because of this, a private preventative tool would be helpful.

Wash your Web, is such a tool to help prevent vicarious trauma. It was designed by a psychiatrist sub-specializing in severe personal trauma, and was presented at the EMSA Tenth Annual Trauma Summit of California, San Francisco, April 2019. It has been ethically approved for a randomised trial (by QUT) but progress has been halted by COVID-19. It is a preventative tool for people who are well but under stress. It is not for people on the brink of burnout, depression or PTSD (who should seek professional diagnosis and treatment) or to process past trauma or abuse. Professionals using this tool need to guarantee their own safety and follow their safety pathways. No treatment should be changed because of using this tool, it is preventative, not a treatment.

RATIONALE: *Why would Wash the Web work?*

“Wash your Web,” (WASH: Wall off empathy, Anticipate strong emotions, Shelve strong emotions and Hold Hope; and WEB: Walk through your day, Express each shelved emotion, and use a Bilateral stimulation technique) utilises four evidence-based principles:

1. Using compassion over empathy;
2. Using re-exposure to strong emotions to decrease anxiety;
3. Using mature defence mechanisms to alleviate anxiety; and
4. Using a bilateral stimulation technique to help process emotions.

Each principle is empirically supported as discussed below.

USING COMPASSION OVER EMPATHY. Empathy is feeling *with* someone. Brain imaging shows that empathy activates the para-cingulate, anterior and posterior cingulate, and the amygdala.¹¹ Using empathy can lead to self-referential negative emotions, social withdrawal and burnout.¹² Compassion is feeling *for* someone. It is mediated in the medial orbitofrontal cortex and ventral striatum and leads to helping behaviour, other-referential emotions, social approach, love, and better health for a helper.¹³ Compassion is preferentially employed in Wash your Web, particularly in Walling off emotions and Holding Hope.

USING EXPOSURE THERAPY. This is supported by evidence spanning decades.¹⁴ Its core principle is controlled re-exposure to decrease anxiety. It is diametrically opposed to avoidance behaviours such as drinking alcohol, venting anger, isolating from peers, quitting, denying distress and putting on an air of invincibility. Wash your Web involves conscious, private re-exposure to work-related emotions to safely process them, particularly in Walk through your day and Express shelved emotions.

USING MATURE DEFENCE MECHANISMS. Defence mechanisms help us deal with anxiety and distress.¹⁵ Mature defence mechanisms are more effective and preferred, but the use of neurotic defence mechanisms is widespread: repression (pushing problem emotions away rather than expressing them, *of course I can handle this, it's my job!*), rationalization (*everyone else seems to cope; emotions are no good*), and denial (*I'm fine; I don't want to talk about it; what's the fuss?*). Wash your Web makes use of mature defence mechanisms in Anticipate strong emotions and Shelve strong emotions: anticipation (making room for an upcoming event such as trauma), and suppression (shelving emotions and dealing with them later). The use of humour, another mature defence mechanism, is also encouraged.

USING A BILATERAL STIMULATION TECHNIQUE. The left and right brains are known to have specialised functions.¹⁶ EMDR, an evidence-based psychotherapy approved in the USA and Australia to treat PTSD, aims to synchronise the two with bilateral stimulation techniques. Its effectiveness has been shown to be equal to CBT.¹⁷ Mechanisms of action of bilateral stimulation are beginning to be elucidated.¹⁸ Wash your Web employs a bilateral stimulation technique to help process strong emotions.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TOOL: *How do I use it?*

The psychological tool, Wash your Web, is used to “wash your web” of strong, on-the-job emotions which can accumulate over time and lead to burnout. It is a two-part acronym to help remember mental tasks to carry out: WASH is for use before and while on shift, and WEB is for processing emotions after a shift.

The first part, WASH, is done pre-shift and between cases. It involves approximately a minute of thinking time to

WALL off empathy,
ANTICIPATE strong emotions,
SHELVE strong emotions to deal with them later, and
HOLD HOPE after HELPING compassionately.

At the end of a shift, WEB processes the shelved emotions. It involves five-to-ten minutes to

WALK through the day’s events in your mind,
EXPOSE and EXPRESS each shelved emotion, and
use a BILATERAL stimulation technique.

WASH takes a few private seconds pre-shift or during morning hand-over, a coffee or toilet break. At the beginning of each shift, and between cases, the health care worker consciously prepares for incoming emotions with WASH: Wall off empathy, Anticipate strong emotions, Shelf each strong emotion, and Hold Hope. The video *Wash your Web (training, pt 1): BEFORE-SHIFT TALK THROUGH* can be used as a guide.

WALL OFF EMPATHY. It’s not important to know the brain pathways needed to walk, but it’s helpful to know the difference between “walk” and “run” to activate the right pathways to achieve the desired result. Likewise, it’s not necessary to know the brain pathways involved to activate compassion over empathy but it helps knowing the difference between “empathy” and “compassion” to get the desired result. Compassion, *My goodness this poor person needs help, what do I need to do, say, and achieve right now?* rather than empathy, *My goodness this poor person needs help, this is shocking, why do these things happen, how would I cope, how does anyone cope?* is needed at work. Knowing this difference helps us intend to use compassion over empathy (the two are closely related just as “walk” and “run” are closely related). Visualising a wall inside the brain to shield empathy centres (particularly the amygdala) is a reminder to intend and use compassion over empathy.

ANTICIPATE STRONG EMOTIONS. Anticipating entails consciously visualising a “space” in the mind; a “shelf” metaphorically built for incoming strong emotions. Anticipation, a mature defence mechanism, is encapsulated by the adage *forewarned is forearmed*.

SHELVE STRONG EMOTIONS. This makes use of suppression, another mature defence mechanism. The health care worker consciously “sits the strong emotion on the shelf” to be dealt with later. Suppression is preferable to repression (pushing emotions down, denying and not processing them). It allows a professional to get on with the day.

HOLD HOPE. You have been helpful; this is affirmed with conscious silent self-talk: *I am a competent professional doing my best under these circumstances; I did OK but will learn for next time; or I did what I could and I hope it goes well for the person.* Things may go well for the person, they may not. The professional reminds themselves that their actions are part of an effort to achieve a good outcome. Holding hope and helping activate neural networks associated with compassion, resulting in positive emotions and better health.

Post-shift, the WEB of shelved strong emotions will be dealt with. This involves five-to-ten minutes before a movie, meal, or interaction with loved ones; perhaps while walking in a park, working out at a gym, jogging, or sitting on a couch (without an alcoholic drink). WEB is Walk through the day’s events, Express each shelved emotion, and use a Bilateral Stimulation Technique. The video *Wash your Web (training, pt 2): AFTER-SHIFT TALK THROUGH* can be used as a guide. It contains useful words to help label and express emotions.

WALK THROUGH YOUR DAY by recalling events in your mind. This prevents denial or repression (which can lead to pushed-down emotions meeting older repressed emotions, festering, and building to erupt like a volcano or burst out in depression or burnout). Briefly go from the start to the end of the shift without getting caught up in any situation. This one minute or so of soft exposure prepares the brain for more exposure to the shelved strong emotions.

EXPOSE AND EXPRESS EACH STRONG EMOTION. One at a time, notice, label and express each shelved emotion.

Notice any strong emotion sitting on your imaginary shelf; this exposes your mind to it.

Label the emotion by finding just the right word for it. Giving it a word ‘captures’ it in order to understand it; this combines thinking and feeling to help process the emotion.

Express the shelved emotions one at a time Recall events and emotions in detail. Re-experience emotions and express them as effectively as possible. Think about the emotion. Control how much is brought to mind. Keep control. The professional may cry, express anger, disgust or fear in words, or express emotions in safe actions using hand gestures. This way, the brain is taught, as it is in exposure therapy, not to fear emotions, but to proficiently handle them. Emotion is processed, “filed away,” by combining thoughts and feelings, and by the controlled expression of tears, anger, and displays of disgust or fear, while thinking about them. You titrate the amount of emotion you allow yourself to feel. This controlled exposure and growing proficiency over emotions promotes health and prevents empathic distress. Using thoughts helps prevent being overwhelmed by an emotion.

A professional should have someone close if a shift was particularly bad. If any emotion is “too much” and a person feels unsafe, professional help should be sought. The tool is to process emotions arising from the shift only. If a professional finds themselves going back to past memories of personal trauma or abuses, this is a sign of needing professional help. This tool is then not to be used. For this reason, we ask someone be present for the first three times it is employed. This conscious exposure of going over events in the mind is done by most people most days and it is safe. Here, the aim is to make it useful.

It is also helpful to laugh privately after shifts or with a trusted colleague at things which were odd, black, frivolous or strange.

A BILATERAL STIMULATION TECHNIQUE helps process emotions. One useful bilateral stimulation technique, used here, involves crossing hands in front of the body, palms towards face, then rest fingers on or near the opposite shoulder or clavicle. Then gently tap fingers alternating Left-Right-L-R-L-R at a relaxed pace, approximately one L-R per heartbeat, while consciously walking through your day and expressing shelved emotions. Each side of the brain is involved in initiating movement and perceiving incoming sense data; they become synchronised to help process traumatic emotions. Use this during all of the post-shift Web, but stop and start whenever you like.

After processing the shelved emotions of a shift, spend a minute with bilateral stimulation while feeling calm, soothed and peaceful. Always end with this.

CONCLUSION: *So what?*

The adverse effects of vicarious trauma come at great personal cost. “Wash your Web” is a safe, private, practical, user-friendly, preventative psychological tool to help prevent burnout, keep you healthy, and keep you active in your contribution in the workforce. Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the tool. If found to be useful, it would be environmentally-friendly, face-saving and cost-effective.

Thank you for the work you do.

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