Scenario 2 – Charleroi: You are dreading sessions, sleeping badly, becoming cynical.

What is happening to you? What do you need?

First: name it clearly, without minimising it

What you are describing is not weakness. It is not burnout from overworking in the ordinary sense. It has a specific name and a specific mechanism:

Vicarious trauma — sometimes called secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue — is the cumulative transformation of your inner world that results from empathic engagement with traumatised people. It is an occupational injury. It happens to competent, committed, caring practitioners. It happens *because* you were doing the work well.

The cynicism, the dread, the disrupted sleep — these are not signs that you have become a bad worker. They are signs that you have been absorbing material your nervous system was not designed to process alone, repeatedly, without sufficient discharge.

What is actually happening — the mechanisms

1. Your nervous system has been doing double duty.

When you sit with someone in a trauma response, your own mirror neuron system activates. You feel, physiologically, an echo of what they feel. Over three months of intense work, that accumulates. Your body has been on low-level alert for weeks — and it's exhausted.

The sleep disruption is not incidental. It is your nervous system failing to fully down-regulate at night because it hasn't been given the conditions to do so.

2. Your meaning-making system has been disrupted.

Traumatised people carry stories that challenge fundamental assumptions about the world — that people are safe, that suffering is bounded, that effort leads to repair. Sustained exposure to those stories gradually erodes your own. Cynicism is often the result of a **worldview under pressure** — not a personality change. It is a defensive posture your psyche adopts when hope has become too costly to sustain unprotected.

3. The dread is a signal, not a character flaw.

Dreading sessions is your mind's way of saying: *I am going somewhere I do not have the resources to go right now.* It is self-protective. The problem is not that you feel it — the problem is that without support, you'll either push through it and deepen the damage, or withdraw from the young people who need consistency most.

4. The specific weight of this group

Three months. Highly traumatised. Charleroi — a context of structural poverty, long-term social fracture. These young people may have brought material that is objectively among the hardest any practitioner encounters: violence, abandonment, grief, abuse, hopelessness worn as a second skin. You were not issued the equipment to carry that alone.

What you need — concretely

Immediately

- **Tell someone.** Not as a crisis disclosure — as a professional reality check. A supervisor, a trusted colleague, your team coordinator. The worst thing vicarious trauma does is convince you to stay silent because naming it feels like failure. It is the opposite of failure. It is accurate self-assessment.
- **Create a threshold ritual.** Something physical and repeatable that marks the boundary between the session world and your own life — a walk, changing clothes, a specific piece of music. Your nervous system needs a signal that the work has ended. Without one, you carry it home invisibly.

In the short term

- **Clinical supervision — specifically trauma-informed.** Not administrative supervision. Space where you can say what the work is doing to you, with someone who understands the mechanism and won't simply tell you to take a break. In Belgium, this may be available through your organisation, the *Service de Santé Mentale* network, or peer supervision structures within youth work federations.
- **Reduce isolated exposure.** If you've been the sole worker with this group, that structure needs to change — not because you've failed, but because no single practitioner should hold a highly traumatised group alone for three months. Co-facilitation, even partial, is a structural protection.
- **Physical discharge.** The stress load is somatic. It needs somatic release — exercise, body-based practices, anything that moves the activation through and out of the nervous system. Thinking your way out of vicarious trauma doesn't work.

Structurally — what your organisation owes you

This is also a systems question. Ask directly for:

- Regular reflective supervision built into the working week, not offered as a perk when things collapse
- A team debrief structure after intense sessions — even 20 minutes of collective processing changes accumulation significantly
- Clear caseload limits for trauma-intensive work
- Access to professional psychological support — in Belgium, some CPAS structures and youth sector organisations have agreements with psychologists for staff

If none of these exist in your organisation, what you are experiencing is partly the predictable consequence of a structural gap — not a personal failure.

Assumptions to challenge — about yourself

Assumption	What to question
"I should be able to handle this."	Handle it *with what*? Adequate support, supervision, rest? Or alone, indefinitely? The latter is not a professional standard — it's an impossible one.
"The young people need me to be okay, so I have to push through."	They need you to be present over time. Pushing through vicarious trauma accelerates the moment you can't be present at all.
"Feeling dread means I no longer care."	It may mean you care so much your system is protecting you from further unprocessed pain. Dread and cynicism are often inverted forms of deep investment.
"Asking for support will worry my team or make me look weak."	Naming vicarious trauma models exactly what you're trying to teach the young people: that difficulty can be spoken, that asking for help is not collapse.
"Taking space from the group would let them down."	Staying without support and deteriorating further lets them down more. You cannot offer consistency you no longer have access to.

One thing to hold onto

You are not becoming a different, worse person. You are a person who has been sitting with enormous pain — other people's pain — and carrying it home, and waking up with it, and going back. The cynicism and the dread are the cost of having stayed open long enough to be affected. That's not nothing. That's what the work requires, and nobody warned you clearly enough about what it would take from you in return.

Getting support is not stepping back from the young people. It is the only way to stay.