

3. SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS AND SELF-CARE PACKET

Educators, counselors, and other support staff who work with students exposed to trauma are at risk of being indirectly traumatized as a result of hearing about their students' experiences and witnessing the negative effects. In the first section of this packet, learn about secondary traumatic stress and related conditions; in the second section, use the tools and strategies provided to help you create individual and schoolwide plans to promote staff self-care and resilience.

Secondary Traumatic Stress and Related Conditions

Secondary traumatic stress (STS) is the emotional distress that results when an individual hears about the traumatic experiences of another individual. Distress may result from hearing someone's trauma stories, seeing high levels of distress in the aftermath of a traumatic event, needing to retell a student's story, and/or seeing photos or images related to the trauma. Individuals with symptoms severe enough could be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Common symptoms of STS include the following:

- Increased anxiety and concern about safety
- Intrusive, negative thoughts and images related to their students' traumatic stories
- Fatigue and physical complaints
- Feeling numb or detached from students
- Feeling powerless or hopeless about students and the work
- Diminished concentration and difficulty with decision making
- Desire to physically or emotionally withdraw from people or situations that trigger difficult thoughts and emotions

Several other terms capture elements of STS, often describing some terms slightly differently from STS.

Burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment. Although burnout also is work related, burnout develops as a result of general occupational stress; the term is not used specifically to describe the effects of indirect trauma exposure.

Compassion fatigue is a less stigmatizing way to describe STS and can be used interchangeably with the term *STS*.

Vicarious trauma refers to internal changes in teachers and staff members who engage empathetically with a student affected by trauma. It is a theoretical term that focuses less on trauma symptoms and more on the cumulative effects of exposure to details about another person's trauma.

Compassion satisfaction describes the positive feelings derived from competent performance as a trauma supporter. It is characterized by positive relationships with colleagues and the conviction that one's efforts contribute in a meaningful way to students, their families, and the community.

Risk Factors for STS and Related Conditions

Any professional who works directly with children exposed to trauma and hears them recount their traumatic experiences is at risk of STS. Additional risk factors associated with STS and related conditions for professionals include:

- Prior trauma exposure
- Female gender
- Inexperience in the field
- Dose of exposure
- Type of work
- Young age

Warning Signs of Vicarious Trauma

Persons who experience vicarious trauma undergo negative changes in their views of themselves, others, and the world. These negative changes eventually affect all aspects of daily life.

Warning Signs of Vicarious Trauma	
Hypervigilance	Excessive alertness for potential threats or dangers at and outside of work. Always being “on” and “on the lookout”
Poor Boundaries	Lacking a balanced sense of your role so that you take on too much, step in and try to control events, have difficulty leaving work at work, or take the work too personally
Avoidance	Coping with stress by shutting down and disconnecting
Inability to Empathize/Numbing	Unable to remain emotionally connected to the work
Addictions	Attaching to distractions to check out from work, personal life, or both
Chronic Exhaustion/ Physical Ailments	Experiencing physical, emotional, and spiritual fatigue or inexplicable aches and pains exceeding what you expect for an ordinary busy day or week
Minimizing	Trivializing a current experience by comparing it with another situation that we regard as more severe
Anger and Cynicism	Using cynicism or anger to cope other intense feelings that we may not understand or know how to manage
Feelings of Professional Inadequacy	Becoming increasingly unsure of yourself professionally, second-guessing yourself, feeling insecure about tasks that you once felt confident to perform

Tools for Staff Self-Care and Resilience

A number of individual and system-level strategies effectively promote staff self-care and resilience. This section includes the following tools for supporting individual and schoolwide strategies for addressing and minimizing the effects of STS and related conditions:

- **3.1 Shared Strategies for Staff Self-Care and Resilience** suggests individual and schoolwide strategies to support a culture of staff wellness.
- **3.2 Staff Self-Care Plan** begins with a personal inventory of warning signs, proceeds to an assessment of self-care practices, and concludes with making a commitment to specific practices.
- **3.3 School Self-Care Plan** offers a process similar to developing an individual self-care plan but for the entire school.

3.1 Shared Strategies for Staff Self-Care and Resilience

Creating a healthy work environment is a shared process that includes individual and school-based strategies. Explore these ideas for what you can do and what your school can do to foster wellness for all.

What You Can Do	What Your School Can Do
Increase your knowledge and awareness of the effects of trauma and STS.	Educate staff about the effects of trauma, STS, and related conditions and provide regular opportunities for staff to address potential issues related to STS.
Assess your current level of burnout, STS, and vicarious trauma.	Identify and monitor STS and related conditions among staff. Here are two tools that may be helpful: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Compassion fatigue self-test http://www.ptsdsupport.net/compassion_fatigue-selftest.html ■ Professional quality of life scale, ProQOL 5 http://proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html
Stay connected to other people and groups that are supportive and nourishing.	Encourage and develop formal strategies for peer support and mentorship.
Identify and incorporate specific self-care strategies for promoting resilience and maintaining a healthy work–life balance (e.g., exercise, good nutrition, supportive networks).	Create a culture that fosters staff resilience that includes: fair leave policies, adequate benefits, a physically safe and secure working environment, sufficient supervision, support and resources to do the work, and processes for shared decision making.

3.2 Staff Self-Care Plan

Use this worksheet to create your own self-care plan. You do not need to share your answers with anyone—this is simply for self-reflection. Check back regularly to see how things are going and assess whether you need to make any adjustments to your plan.

1. Recognize the warning signs.

Becoming aware of the effects your work has on you is essential to helping you take care of yourself. Think about the warning signs of STS and related conditions and consider how they may be present in your daily life. Even if you are not regularly exposed to student trauma, you may be struggling with issues of burnout or remnants of your own personal trauma experience. Feel free to add other signs that you are feeling overworked, overextended, or overwhelmed.

Warning Sign	Yes or No	If Yes, Describe the Effect on You
Increased anxiety or concern about safety	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Intrusive, negative thoughts and images related to your student's traumatic experiences	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Difficulty maintaining work–life boundaries	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Avoiding people, places, and activities that you used to find enjoyable	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Feeling emotionally numb, disconnected, or unable to empathize	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

Warning Sign	Yes or No	If Yes, Describe the Effect on You
Experiencing feelings of chronic exhaustion and related physical ailments	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Regularly feeling angry and/or cynical about students, staff, and your work	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Feeling inadequate in your work and questioning whether what you do matters	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Other:		

2. Assess your self-care practice.

Many strategies are available to support self-care and reduce the signs and symptoms of STS and related conditions. Take some time to complete the self-care self-assessment below. This tool provides ideas about how to practice self-care across many areas of your life. Remember that no one strategy works for everyone.

How often do you do the following? (Rate, using the following scale):

5–Frequently 4–Sometimes 3–Rarely 2–Never 1–It never even occurred to me

Physical self-care

Eat regularly (e.g., breakfast and lunch)
Eat healthfully
Exercise or go to the gym
Lift weights
Practice martial arts
Get regular medical care for prevention
Get medical care when needed
Take time off when you are sick
Get massages or other body work

Do physical activity that is fun for you
Take time to be sexual
Get enough sleep
Wear clothes you like
Take vacations
Take day trips or mini-vacations
Get away from stressful technology, such as pagers, faxes, telephones, and e-mail
Other:

Psychological self-care

Make time for self-reflection
Go to see a psychotherapist or counselor for yourself
Write in a journal
Read literature unrelated to work
Do something at which you are a beginner
Take a step to decrease stress in your life
Notice your inner experience—your dreams, thoughts, imagery, and feelings
Let others know different aspects of you
Engage your intelligence in a new area—go to an art museum, performance, sports event, exhibit, or other cultural event
Practice receiving from others
Be curious
Say no sometimes to extra responsibilities
Spend time outdoors
Other:

Emotional self-care

Spend time with others whose company you enjoy
Stay in contact with important people in your life
Treat yourself kindly (supportive inner dialogue or self-talk)
Feel proud of yourself
Reread favorite books, review favorite movies
Identify and seek out comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places
Allow yourself to cry
Find things that make you laugh

Express your outrage in a constructive way
Play with children
Other:

Spiritual self-care

Make time for prayer, meditation, and reflection
Spend time in nature
Participate in a spiritual gathering, community, or group
Be open to inspiration
Cherish your optimism and hope
Be aware of nontangible (nonmaterial) aspects of life
Be open to mystery, to not knowing
Identify what is meaningful to you and notice its place in your life
Sing
Express gratitude
Celebrate milestones with rituals that are meaningful to you
Remember and memorialize loved ones who have died
Nurture others
Have awe-filled experiences
Contribute to or participate in causes you believe in
Read inspirational literature
Listen to inspiring music
Other:

Workplace or professional self-care

Take time to eat lunch
Take time to chat with coworkers
Make time to complete tasks
Identify projects or tasks that are exciting, growth promoting, and rewarding for you

	Pursue regular learning and professional development
	Get support from colleagues

	Negotiate for your needs
	Have a peer support group
	Other:

Follow-up questions to consider

1. What was this process of filling out the checklist like for you?

2. Were you surprised by any of your responses? If so, which ones?

3. In what areas are you strongest? Weakest?

3. Adopt specific strategies.

Based on your responses to the self-care self-assessment, list 1–2 things in each area that you already do and 1–2 things that you would like to do to take care of yourself. Then choose 3–5 things from your list that you can make a commitment to doing in the next month.

Area	Already Do	Would Like to Do
Physical		
Relational		
Emotional		
Spiritual		
Professional		

Committed to doing:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

3.3 School Self-Care Plan

These checklists will help you recognize warning signs of STS at a school level and to choose schoolwide strategies to support self-care.

1. Recognize the warning signs.

A range of warning signs can indicate that your school as a whole may be affected by trauma. Check any signs you detect in your school.

	School environment is often chaotic, disorganized, and unpredictable.
	Staff members are often fearful of their own safety.
	Staff members often use harsh and punitive discipline practices to regain control.
	The school has a high rate of staff turnover.
	The school has a high rate of staff absenteeism.
	There is a lack of communication and/or frequent miscommunication among staff members.
	Interpersonal conflicts are increasing among staff members in different roles or departments.
	Work is often incomplete.
	Work quality is often poor.
	The school has a negative atmosphere.
	People at the school feel a lack of emotional and/or physical safety.
	Staff members have less energy or motivation to go the extra mile.
	Staff members collectively tend to be cynical and negative about students.
	Student and family complaints about the school have increased.

2. Assess your schoolwide self-care practices.

Check everything that your school currently does to support staff members in each domain.

Training and education

	The school provides education to all employees on the signs of STS and related conditions such as vicarious trauma.
	The school provides all employees with professional development related to stress management, self-care, and resilience-focused strategies.

	The school provides all employees with training related to their job tasks.
	Staff members are given opportunities to attend refresher trainings and trainings on new topics related to their roles.
	Staff coverage is in place to support training.
	The school provides education on steps necessary to advance employees in their roles.

Support and supervision

	The school offers an employee assistance program.
	Employee job descriptions and responsibilities are clearly defined.
	All staff members have access to regular supervision or support by administrators or peers.
	Staff members have access to ongoing support for managing workload and time needed to complete tasks.
	Staff members are encouraged to understand their own stress reactions and take appropriate steps to develop their own self-care plans.
	Staff members are regularly supported in practicing self-care strategies.
	Staff members are welcome to discuss concerns about the school or their jobs with administrators without negative consequences (e.g., being treated differently, feeling like their jobs are in jeopardy, or having their concerns affect their positions on the team).
	Staff members are encouraged to take breaks, including lunch and vacation time.
	The school fosters team-based support and mentoring for staff.

Employee control and input

	The school provides opportunities for staff members to give input into practices and policies.
	The school reviews its policies on a regular basis to identify whether the policies are helpful or harmful to the health and well-being of its employees.
	The school provides opportunities for staff members to identify their professional goals.
	Staff members have formal channels for addressing problems and grievances.
	Workplace issues, including grievance issues and interpersonal difficulties, are managed by individuals in the appropriate roles and are confidential.

Communication

	Staff members attend regularly scheduled team meetings.
	Topics related to self-care and stress management are addressed in team meetings.
	Regular discussions of how people and departments are communicating and relaying information occur in team meetings.
	The school has a way of assessing staff level of STS and related conditions.
	The school has a way of evaluating staff satisfaction on a regular basis.

Work environment

	The school environment is well lit.
	The school environment is physically well maintained (e.g., clean, secure).
	Information about self-care is posted in places that are visible.
	Employee rights are posted in places that are visible.
	The school provides opportunities for community building among employees.
	The school has policies concerning acts of discrimination, harassment, disrespect, and bullying for staff.
	The school responds promptly to any acts of discrimination, harassment, disrespect, and bullying among staff.

3. Adopt specific strategies that promote staff self-care and resilience.

Based on your responses on the school self-care assessment, list 1–2 things in each area that your school already does to support staff and 1–2 things that you would like to see more of to promote staff wellness.

If you are in a leadership position, you may consider gathering staff opinions related to the school's current support for self-care and use the feedback to identify gaps and related action steps. If you are not in a position to implement some of these strategies, take this school self-care plan to your supervisors or directors for their consideration.

Area	Already Do	Would Like to Do
Training and Education		
Support and Supervision		
Employee Control and Input		
Communication		
Work Environment		

References

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Secondary Traumatic Stress Committee. (2011). *Secondary traumatic stress: A fact sheet for child-serving professionals*. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.
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