

Secondary Traumatic Stress

SUPPORTING EDUCATORS SO THEY CAN SUPPORT STUDENTS

Working with students experiencing trauma such as community violence can itself be a traumatic experience. Learn how to identify signs of Secondary Traumatic Stress in teachers and staff and help them access the resources they need to remain effective educators and advocates for students.

It is conservatively estimated that 1 in 4 children attending schools in the United States has been exposed to a traumatic event that can affect learning and behavior.¹ Further, 61% of adults have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, with many experiencing two or more.² During the pandemic 4 in 10 adults have reported symptoms of anxiety and depressive disorder, an increase by roughly 30% since 2019.³ We are all experiencing a collective trauma and we can no longer educate as if it is not affecting our students, ourselves, and our educational and community systems as a whole.

Trauma responsive school-wide and community-wide initiatives require a resilient workforce that can attune to the needs of children and families. However, in the midst of a global pandemic in which much of the public is experiencing traumatic stress symptoms and worsening mental health conditions, the health of our educators and of our workforce must be addressed in parallel. In this brief, secondary traumatic stress will be defined and explored, along with ways educators and school communities can respond to mitigate its impact.

1 NCTSN Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators

2 Jones CM, Merrick MT, Houry DE. Identifying and Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences: Implications for Clinical Practice. JAMA. 2020;323(1):25–26. doi:10.1001/jama.2019.18499

3 KFF analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, [Household Pulse Survey, 2020-2021](#)

The 4 Rs of Trauma- Informed Systems

REALIZE both the widespread effects of trauma and the many pathways to recovery.

RECOGNIZE the signs and symptoms of trauma.

RESPOND with a trauma-informed approach that's integrated into every aspect of the system in which you're working.

RESIST re-traumatization by reducing the likelihood of triggers

Secondary traumatic stress, often referred to as STS, vicarious trauma, or compassion fatigue is defined as emotional distress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experience of another. It can lead to the development of traumatic stress symptoms.⁴ These symptoms often go unidentified, leading many educators to feel isolated and alone. Those who have shared their experience with symptoms of fatigue, loss of hope, or lack of self-competency are often labeled as “burned out” and provided with little support on how to cope. Implementing policies and procedures to address secondary traumatic stress in school staff can support those with a mission to reduce youth violence and aid in mitigating the impact of victimization on students.

Secondary Traumatic Stress, like trauma, can have a layering effect, impacting our functioning over time. Since symptoms do not always immediately present, secondary traumatic stress can often be internalized as a failing on the part of the helper. School staff, no matter their role, care deeply about the students they work with. Those students have often experienced trauma, discrimination, housing insecurity, and abuse, of which teachers may be aware. Many educators and school staff members witness ongoing violence toward students and other teachers in schools, are the first to be told by a student about abuse or neglect, or witness the impact of poverty and lack of access on student success. The care we give and have for students takes a toll both emotionally and physically. This care is not a failing on the part of the educator, it's part of being a compassionate and empathetic teacher. There is little research on how widespread secondary traumatic stress is in education; however, a study of 250 educators conducted in 2012 by the University of Montana found 75% reported high levels of secondary traumatic stress.⁵

To respond to secondary traumatic stress, we first have to know the symptoms. Schools working to address workforce resilience are encouraged to share information about secondary traumatic stress with staff in meetings, trainings, and by providing educational materials. Many organizations have begun to respond to secondary traumatic stress by developing peer support groups, encouraging use of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), or creating pathways for staff to receive counseling from local providers individually or in groups.

4 NCTSN, Secondary Traumatic Stress: A Fact Sheet for Child Serving Professionals

5 Cameo Bortrager, James C. Caringi, Richard van den Pol, Lindsay Crosby, Kelsey O'Connell, Ashley Trautman & Molly McDonald (2012) Secondary Traumatic Stress in School Personnel, *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*, 5:1, 38-50, DOI:10.1080/1754730X.2012.664862

Signs & Symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress

- Loss of hope
- Changes in worldview (“The world is unfair, not a safe place”)
- Sleep disturbance
- Increased fatigue
- Anxiety and concerns about safety
- Avoidance
- Intrusive thoughts or pre-occupation with students and families outside of work
- Nightmares
- Physical health complaints
- Diminished concentration
- Feeling isolated, estranged, detached, or alienated
- Increased irritability
- Feeling easily overwhelmed
- Questioning your competence, experiencing low self-worth
- Low job satisfaction
- Feeling loss of desire and motivation
- Feeling shame, guilt, and self-doubt

When experienced collectively, secondary traumatic stress can have a larger impact, negatively affecting the organization as a whole and disrupting the delivery of education and services. Organizations experiencing a high rate of secondary traumatic stress among staff can have higher rates of turnover, negative staff culture, and breakdowns in communication and transparency. These organizations can become reactive rather than proactive and can have difficulty responding to the needs of students and their families.

Utilization and Practice Tips

NORMALIZE SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS (STS)

It's important for educators and staff to know the signs and symptoms of secondary traumatic stress and to know they are not alone. This is the first step in mitigating the impact of secondary traumatic stress. Administrators can help by providing staff with information about secondary traumatic stress and opportunities to reflect on their own experience with it. Information on STS can be provided through newsletters, professional development workshops, and at staff meetings. Staff can be encouraged to assess their own symptoms by using the Professional Quality of Life Scale (or ProQol), which addresses symptoms of secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction and burnout.

ENSURE STAFF HAVE ACCESS TO COMPREHENSIVE MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT

Many districts have Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) that offer phone support, connection to services, and access to counseling when needed. However, many staff are either not aware of their EAP and how to access it or are hesitant to use them for fear that their private information will get back to their employer. It is important to ensure that information about EAPs and staff rights to confidentiality is shared widely. Some districts have partnered with local mental health organizations to provide staff access to counselors either in the school building or available locally in their communities. Access to both individual counseling and group education sessions with a trained mental health professional can provide information and space for staff to share freely about their experiences.

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR STAFF CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY BUILDING

Creating opportunities for connection across grades and professions is essential to reduce professional isolation and increase protective factors for teachers. Many schools have adopted mentoring programs, pairing more seasoned educators with new staff members to aid with professional development and provide opportunity for professional collaboration and mutual support. Professional development days can also be an opportunity to provide staff with new ways to build relationships with their peers through shared learning and team building activities. Some districts have also built in educator wellness retreats during the school year or summer months that provide opportunity for staff to focus on their own health and wellness and offer ways for the administration to give back to teachers. Districts have also made ongoing wellness opportunities available to staff after school, including yoga or meditation classes, and unstructured community building time. Other schools have decided to give back together, by volunteering their time in their community or developing mentoring programs for youth in their school.

ENSURE STAFF HAVE VOICE AND CHOICE IN DECISION MAKING

Staff have a critical voice and role in changing culture across a school or district. Their “buy-in” can make the difference between an initiative failing or succeeding. Staff working directly with students have the greatest understanding of the needs in their classroom and for their families, aside from the students and families themselves. It is crucial to hear their voices when making decisions. This can be done through staff surveys and gathering regular feedback from staff about what is working and what continues to be a challenge. Many schools making the choice to become trauma-informed have developed steering committees made up of teachers, staff, students, and families, which provide feedback throughout the process and make decisions related to priority needs.

DEVELOP PLANS FOR DEBRIEFING AFTER CRITICAL INCIDENTS

So much can happen in the school day that it can feel like school staff are constantly putting out small fires, moving from one crisis to the next. This reactive response can take a toll over time and is a risk factor in developing STS. When crisis incidents occur, staff benefit from policies and procedures that outline crisis response and follow up. Policies and procedures around crisis response and staff and student debriefing can aid in reducing youth violence and victimization. Policies and procedures can include staff training on de-escalation and crisis management, debriefing protocols, and re-entry plans. Staff debriefing can include a check in with an administrator or a trained peer. Information about common symptoms after exposure to a potentially traumatic event is also valuable, along with space to discuss the event and its impact on the staff member. Administrators should also ensure staff know what supports are available to them, including EAPs or additional staff benefits.

After a crisis, having systems for communication to loop back to teachers can assist staff in gaining a better understanding of how to support a student and aid with a smooth re-entry. Communication should be respectful of the student and their privacy but also provide information on what might be helpful for the student in the future to reduce future crisis or escalation. Some schools have adopted trauma-informed safety plans, which are developed in collaboration with students and address potential triggers, warning signs, and helpful solutions.

Resources

[Family Services of Rhode Island Healing Division](#)

[Professional Quality of Life Scale](#)

[Compassion Fatigue Wallet Cards](#)

[The Trauma Stewardship Institute](#)

[Future Tripping Podcast](#)

[Trauma Responsive School Implementation Assessment](#),

an evidence-informed self-assessment for schools and districts developed by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network

[NCTSN's Creating, Supporting and Sustaining Trauma Informed Schools: A System Framework](#)

[U.S. Department of Education's Education in the Pandemic: The Disparate Impact of Covid 19](#)

[Education Brief: ACEs for Educators and Stakeholders](#)

What is the CYVP Program?

The Comprehensive School-Based Approach to Youth Violence and Victimization (CYVP) grant program supports a comprehensive effort to address youth violence and victimization through the implementation of evidence-based prevention, intervention, and accountability efforts in a school-based setting. This includes opportunities for schools to partner with community-based organizations to create or build upon strategies that increase safety in schools and throughout the community.



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