Secondary Effects of Trauma

Secondary traumatic effects are extensive and can look different for different people. However, like direct trauma, they often include physical, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive symptoms.

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What Are Secondary Traumatic Effects?

Secondary traumatic stress (STS), vicarious trauma, and historical trauma are three ways trauma can affect those who do not directly experience it.

- Secondary traumatic stress is the emotional duress that occurs when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another person.
- Vicarious trauma refers to changes in a service provider's inner experience that result from empathic engagement with a person who has experienced trauma.
- Historical trauma plays an important role when working with populations that have traditionally been underserved, marginalized, or excluded by a lack of access to services. Historical trauma is held across generations, and even those who have not directly experienced the trauma can feel the effects generations later.

Check Your Symptoms

- ☐ Increased cynicism or seriousness
- ☐ Sensitivity to violence
- ☐ Overwhelming grief or despair
- ☐ Intrusive thoughts
- ☐ Chronic fatigue

- ☐ Emotional exhaustion
- ☐ Anger
- ☐ Fearfulness
- ☐ Shame
- ☐ Physical illness
- ☐ Absenteeism and turnover

- ☐ Loss of identity
- ☐ Low self esteem
- ☐ No sense of safety
- ☐ Difficulty forming healthy relationships
- ☐ Disconnection from community and traditions

If you regularly experience any combination of the above symptoms over a prolonged period of time (3 months or more), consider reaching out to a trained mental health care professional.

Additional tools:

- **National Center for PTSD's Provider Self-Care Toolkit**

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How Does Your Organization Support Staff?

Being a trauma-informed organization means creating a safe space for staff and supporting them as they transition into working with individuals and families in a more trauma-informed way. The secondary effects of trauma are inevitable when working in a profession where you help others who have experienced trauma. However, there are things you and your organization can do to support staff well-being and mitigate these effects. The following resources can help your organization assess how it currently addresses employees' work-related exposure to trauma and prioritize organizational needs.

- **Office for Victims of Crime's Vicarious Trauma Toolkit**
- **Vicarious Trauma Organizational Readiness Guide (VT-ORG) for Victim Services Self-Assessment**
- **VT-ORG Scoresheet and Action Plan**

Next Steps

For Individuals

- ☐ Find someone to talk to.
- ☐ Be patient with yourself.
- ☐ Know that your feelings are normal.
- ☐ Practice good self-care.

Avoid:

- ☐ Blaming others
- ☐ Working longer and harder
- ☐ Self-medicating
- ☐ Neglecting your own needs and interests
- ☐ Acting rashly

For Organizations

- ☐ Foster resilience.
- ☐ Set realistic expectations.
- ☐ Connect with colleagues.
- ☐ Encourage staff to set boundaries.
- ☐ Honor breaks and lunches.
- ☐ Encourage and model a culture of self-care (e.g., sleep habits, nutritional habits, physical exercise).
- ☐ Modify the environment.
- ☐ Create a welcoming and aesthetically pleasing space for staff.
- ☐ Find places other than the office to meet, if possible, to give staff a change of scene.
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- ☐ Rotate challenging cases, and diversify job tasks.
- ☐ Meet regularly, and check in with staff to make sure they feel heard.
- ☐ Allow for flexible schedules, if possible.

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