

# SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS



## WHAT IS SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS?

Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is the natural and consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other, and the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person (Figley, 1995).

### WHAT CAUSES STS?

- The death of a child or adult on the worker's caseload.
- Investigating a vicious abuse or neglect report.
- Frequent exposure to children's emotional accounts of traumatic events.
- Photographic images of injuries or scenes of a serious injury or death.
- Helping to support grieving family members following a child abuse death, including the siblings of the deceased child.
- Concerns about agency funding and resources.
- Concerns about being publicly scapegoated for a tragic outcome when lacking the means or authority to intervene effectively.

### WHY IS STS IMPORTANT?

- The effects of STS on child welfare workers are intense and widespread.
- STS decreases worker effectiveness and contributes to turnover.
- STS impacts an agency's ability to provide services.

### SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STS

- Preoccupation with clients/client stories.
- Intrusive thoughts/nightmares/flashbacks.
- Arousal symptoms.
- Avoidance (including certain clients).
- Thoughts of violence/revenge.
- Feeling estranged/isolated/having no one to talk to.
- Feeling trapped, and/or "infected" by trauma, hopeless, or inadequate.
- Having difficulty separating work from personal life.

### HOW TO HELP

Self-care suggestions:

- Get adequate sleep.
- Meditate and/or practice mindfulness.
- Eat well.
- Spend time engaging in supportive and nurturing relationships.

References:

Figley CR. Compassion fatigue as secondary traumatic stress disorder: An overview. In: Figley CR, editor. Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized. Brunner-Routledge; New York: 1995. pp. 1–20.

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