

Self-Care for Providers of Trauma Patients

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Caring for people who have experienced trauma can have secondary effects on providers and other people close to the patient. Secondary traumatic stress, sometimes called vicarious trauma, is a psychological consequence that can happen when caring for trauma victims, listening to their traumatic stories, or being a firsthand witness of trauma and its effects.¹ This can manifest in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other related conditions.²

Signs of secondary traumatic stress³

- **Physical responses:**
 - Fatigue, trouble sleeping, changes in appetite, headaches, upset stomach, chronic muscle tension, or sexual dysfunction
- **Emotional responses:**
 - Feeling overwhelmed or emotionally drained, feeling helpless or inadequate, increased mood swings and irritability, crying more than usual, or having suicidal or violent ideations or urges
- **Behavioral responses:**
 - Isolation or withdrawal, restlessness, changes in alcohol or drug use, or experiencing negative changes in personal and professional relationships
- **Cognitive responses:**
 - Emotional numbing, disbelief, mentally reliving events, confusion, impaired memory, decreased decision-making or problem-solving skills, or experiencing distressing fantasies or nightmares

Recognize red flags

To help minimize your risk of burnout and secondary traumatic stress, it is important to recognize their symptoms, practice self-care and seek help when needed.

Related conditions of secondary traumatic stress

In addition to PTSD-related symptoms, providers may also experience burnout in response to secondary trauma. According to *Psychology Today*, burnout is a “state of chronic stress that leads to physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism, detachment, and feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment.”⁴

Watch for signs of burnout:⁴

- Feelings of physical and emotional exhaustion
- Feelings of depression and anxiety
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feelings of detachment or cynicism related to one’s job
- Loss of enjoyment and satisfaction in work and other areas of life



Promoting self-care

When working with children, families, and adults with complex and challenging conditions, injuries, or experiences, use the following self-care tips to help prevent secondary traumatic stress:³

- Be aware of emotional reactions and distress when confronting others' traumatic experiences.
- Be aware of your limitations and different traumas that may be a trigger for you.
- Connect with colleagues or others you trust by talking about your feelings and reactions to trauma.
- Maintain a balance between your professional and personal life, with a focus on self-care, to prevent or lessen the effects of workplace stress. This includes all the important things you tell patients such as eating healthy foods, exercising regularly, and getting enough sleep.

Post-traumatic growth is an outcome and a process. It is about maintaining a sense of hope that a person who has experienced trauma not only persists but experiences positive life changes.

Sources:

1. "Self Care and Secondary Trauma for Providers," Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, <https://www.healthcaretoolbox.org/self-care-for-provider>.
2. "Secondary Traumatic Stress," National Child Traumatic Stress Network, https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/secondary_traumatic_stress_child_serving_professionals.pdf.
3. "Self Care Tips to Prevent Secondary Traumatic Stress" Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, <https://www.healthcaretoolbox.org/self-care-tips-prevent-secondary-stress>.
4. Sherrie Bourg Carter, "Where Do You Fall on the Burnout Continuum?" *Psychology Today*, May 6, 2012, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/high-octane-women/201205/where-do-you-fall-on-the-burnout-continuum>.