

EDUCATOR SELF-CARE

“Schools and school systems must provide the space necessary for educators to take care of themselves – or risk losing them.” Jolon McNeil, an educator

Any educator who works directly with traumatized children and adolescents is vulnerable to feelings of anxiety and emotional distress, becoming mentally and emotionally worn out, and feeling overwhelmed by students’ traumas. These feelings and experiences are called compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious traumatization. These reactions are not signs of weakness, they are the cost of caring about and for those more vulnerable than ourselves.

Knowledge and self-awareness to enable early recognition of distress and implementation of self-care strategies are the keys to maintaining the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health that enables educators to be present and fully engaged in meeting students’ needs.

These research-to-practice briefs are dedicated to facilitating making educator self-care an intentional aspect of professional development.

Recognizing and Addressing Secondary Traumatic Stress

While there is growing national attention focused on supporting traumatized students, the effects that providing care for these students has on school personnel is just beginning to enter the broader conversation about school functioning. Educators and other adults working in schools who serve students coping with high levels of trauma are at risk of developing compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress (STS). Compassion fatigue can lead to burn out, especially in early career educators. Because STS can cause impairments in daily functioning, it is important that educators are aware of the symptoms of STS, understand preventative actions, and treatment options.

What is Secondary Traumatic Stress?

The symptoms of STS include intrusive thoughts, avoidance, negative moods, hyperarousal, and reactivity.

Key Characteristics of STS include:

- Heightened sense of empathy
- Pushing oneself too hard to get things done
- Neglecting one’s own needs and emotions
- Difficulty concentrating
- Low sense of self-esteem
- Low sense of self-efficacy

- Feelings of grandiosity

You are at increased risk of developing STS if:

- You work with many people who have experienced trauma
- You hear a recount of someone else's experience with trauma
- You are empathetic
- You identify as female
- You have personally experienced trauma and have not received adequate support to process the events

Secondary Traumatic Stress in Educators

Teacher stress often results from the high workloads or challenges managing student behavior related to working in high-needs schools.

Students' traumatic events can have a profound effect on the school personnel who support them. STS can affect all aspects of teachers functioning:

Physical: Fatigue, upset stomach or nausea, Difficulty breathing, insomnia

Emotional: Detached from students, anxiety, guilt, sadness or depression

Cognitive: Difficulty concentrating, low self-esteem, self-doubt

Spiritual: Questions one's purpose and the meaning of life

Behavioral: Changes in appetite, sleep disturbances, maladaptive coping including drug and alcohol use, gambling and shopping

Interpersonal: Isolating oneself from loved ones

Professional: Low performance and effort at work, low morale

Because of this broad range of effects, teachers experiencing STS may notice changes in their interpersonal and professional lives. Essentially, the effects of STS are not limited to teacher's

“The impact of STS [secondary traumatic stress] on a teacher's personal or professional life can be devastating or debilitating, and acknowledging and recognizing the signs of STS can be one of the first steps in ameliorating its effect.”

school and classroom functioning it can also affect daily functioning at home

What is self-care?

Self-care can be a powerful way of both preventing and treating STS. Self-care refers to those activities performed with the intention of improving or restoring health and well-being. It is an individual process and important for healing. Self-care can take many forms:

Social: belonging to positive social networks, maintain relationships with friends, attending social activities or events.

Physical: appropriate exercise, proper eating habits, proper amount of sleep

Intellectual: include reading books, attending work-shops or seminars, learning a new craft or developing a new hobby

Financial: itemizing bills; monitoring expenses, incorporating expenses for leisure activities, talk with a financial consultant

Spiritual: taking steps to reconnect with your Higher Power, attending religious services, participating in study groups, daily reflection on your purpose in life

Environmental: taking a walk outdoors, creating a specific space in your home that is reserved only for healthy activities or rest, camping or contributing to an environmentally sound cause

Psychological First Aid

Teachers usually learn about Psychological First Aid as a set of strategies for helping students cope with traumatic experiences, but it can also be used to help teachers support each other through the stress of meeting students' needs.

The principles of Psychological First Aid can be used to provide peer to peer support when dealing with and processing traumatic incidents.

The five steps of peer-to-peer Psychological First Aid are:

1. Listen:

Teachers learn how to approach a fellow teacher in distress and encourage them to share their feelings. It is important for teachers to use active listening, validate their colleagues feelings, and avoid fixing their problems.

2. Protect:

Any adult working in the school can experience secondary traumatic stress. Teachers learn the importance of changing the school environment to reduce the risk of re-traumatizing colleagues.

3. Connect:

Teachers learn that given that one common reaction to a traumatic event is emotional and social isolation, it is critical for teachers to help each other reestablish their normal social relationships.

4. Model Calm and Optimistic Behavior:

Teachers learn ways to model calm and optimistic behavior to their fellow teachers. This includes supporting their colleagues as they problem solve daily challenges to be their best selves in the school.

5. Teach:

Teachers learn how to identify stress symptoms and how and when to approach a colleague who has experienced trauma using role play scenarios.

How can school systems help prevent secondary traumatic stress?

The school environment is not only important for student success but also for the well-being and efficacy of school personnel. School systems can provide supports for school personnel in various ways:

- Normalizing the challenge of experiencing STS and providing a venue for discussion and support.
- Organizing professional development sessions at schools to provide important strategies to recognize the signs of STS and proactive ways of mitigating it.
- Creating a larger whole-school approach for improving the overall climate of the school (socioemotional learning, Positive Behavior Supports).
- Providing opportunities for peer support, which can help build collegiality, reduce isolation, and provide important opportunities to vent the difficult feelings often associated with helping others.
- Recognizing and understanding the need for self-care.

Adapted from:

Hydon, S., Wong, M., Langley, A. K., Stein, B. D., & Kataoka, S. H. (2015). Preventing secondary traumatic stress in educators. *Child and adolescent psychiatric clinics of North America*, 24(2), 319-333.