

Secondary Trauma: Working in the Presence of Pain and Suffering

presented by
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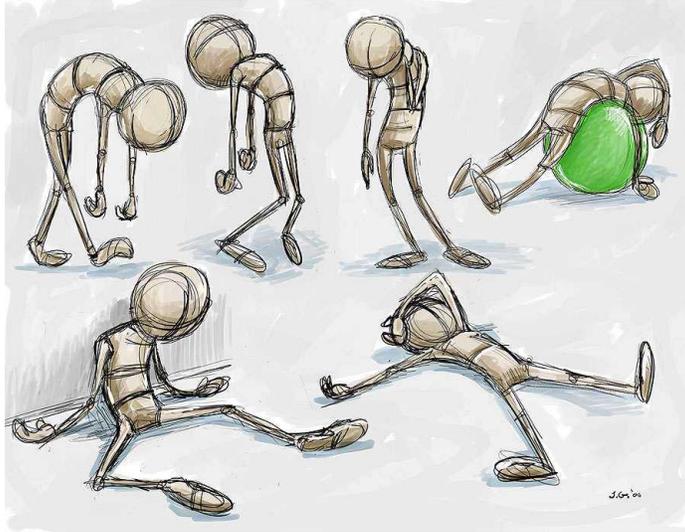


A special "thank you" to Laura Lipsky,
the author of *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring
for Self While Caring for Others.*

What I have learned about the impact of secondary trauma,
working in the presence of chronic pain and suffering
on people in the "helping profession",
has been significantly enhanced
because of you and your work.

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Is anyone alive...?



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in and out....

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Secondary trauma, often referred to as vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue, occurs when individuals indirectly experience the distress and suffering of others who have undergone traumatic events. It can result from repeated exposure to distressing details of another person's trauma. This emotional duress can happen even if you didn't experience the trauma directly yourself.

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Burnout is sometimes referred to as secondary trauma. While it's similar in symptoms and presentation, secondary trauma can be a direct result of engaging with or witnessing trauma. But burnout can occur for a variety of reasons such as an unrelenting workload.

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Given your role/job,
what is the pain and suffering
that you are in the presence of?



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The impact of working in the
presence of suffering,
stress or trauma
impacts you more than you
know...



this is secondary trauma.

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All are affected by working in the presence of pain and suffering; however, secondary traumatic stress is when one's capacity to cope goes beyond one's threshold.

The risk appears to be greater among women and among individuals who are highly empathetic by nature or have unresolved personal trauma.

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The risk of STS is also higher based on the following factors:

- high dose of exposure
- work environment stressors (conflict with co-workers, vague work expectations and boundaries)
- newer staff (fewer years of experience in the field)
- personal history with trauma
- variable personal social emotional competencies
- lacking a supportive process for discussing traumatic content
- minimal access to supervision, professional development, or mental health resources

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“The pain around us can actually change our own psychological and physiological responses, altering our world view.”

~ Laura van Dernoot Lipsky

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Signs that the stress is impacting you...

1. Feeling helpless or hopeless
2. A sense that I can never do enough
3. Hypervigilant
4. Lack of creativity
5. Minimizing
6. Chronic exhaustion/physical ailments
7. Deliberate avoidance/inability to listen
8. Ongoing anger and cynicism
9. Inability to empathize/numbing
10. Addictions
11. Grandiosity – inflated sense of your importance related to work

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Signs that the stress is impacting you...

In some situations, there may be a tendency to consider less extreme experiences of trauma as less real and deserving of support.

For some, a higher level of suffering is required to capture one's attention.

Minimizing, which is a sign/symptom of STS, can manifest in downplaying anything that does not fall into the most extreme category of hardship.



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Signs that the stress is impacting you...

Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness are common in those experiencing STS. Questions may arise about whether one is making an impact or the purpose of such hard work.

It may be challenging to see progress toward positive change, and one might feel overwhelmed with the belief that nothing can improve the situation. Success may be difficult to acknowledge.



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Another potential indication of secondary traumatic stress is a sense that one can never do enough. The feeling that one is not doing enough and should be doing more is common.

Chronic exhaustion and/or physical ailments are noticeable symptoms. The impact of stress on our bodies is widely known, and Secondary Traumatic Stress is a unique form of stress.

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The inability to embrace complexity may also be seen. This is evident in rigid expectations of others, seeking clear signs of right and wrong, and feeling the need to choose sides. While some individuals naturally approach situations in this manner, it could indicate Secondary Traumatic Stress if it deviates from one's usual way of being.

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Being completely focused on one's job to the point where it becomes impossible to be present for other aspects of life is another potential sign of STS. Feeling "on" at all times, even when it may not be necessary or appropriate, can also be indicative of Secondary Traumatic Stress.



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Feelings of guilt are associated with Secondary Traumatic Stress. Feeling guilty in and of itself is common however, when one feels guilty about finding things in life pleasurable when the children and families one works with are suffering is a potential symptom. Guilt may distract from being present in one's life and make it difficult to find joy.

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Anger and cynicism are potential signs of STS. Anger can be helpful in some situations however; it is important to be aware of how one's anger manifests. Is the humor in the workplace responsible or cynical? A cynical sense of humor can be an effort to cope with anger.



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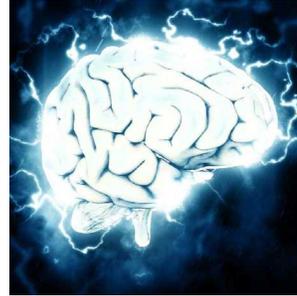
Losing track of moments in one's work because something someone said has significantly dysregulated them is a notable sign.

Having difficulty staying present, forgetting the last five sentences they have spoken, or finding that they have not heard the last part of what someone else has shared are all considered dissociative moments.

Although some may experience such moments from time to time, dissociative moments, which are also a symptom of trauma, may occur more often when one is experiencing STS.

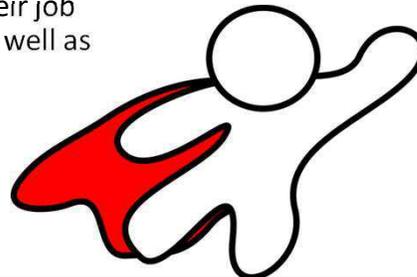
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An inability to empathize, numbing, or having difficulty experiencing or regulating emotions are other potential indications of STS. One may have numbed out intense feelings because they are scared and/or feel out of control. As a result, the use of substances and other distractions to check out are ways to manage the feelings associated with Secondary Traumatic Stress.



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Grandiosity is another symptom of STS. It is related to the feeling that one's work is incredibly important, as are they. In such situations, they believe that they are the only ones who can do their job and that no one else can do it as well as they do.



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Often, people experiencing Secondary Traumatic Stress experience nightmares, sleep problems, and intrusive thoughts related to the stories of trauma.

Bearing witness to the suffering of others brings to light the dangers of the world and they fear intense feelings or personal vulnerability.

Although anxiety and depression are common symptoms separate from Secondary Traumatic Stress, when not one's usual experience, they may also be an indication of STS.

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“Many of us have built architecture around our hearts to defend against the frustration, pain and suffering around us.

For some of us, the fortress gets bigger and the walls higher and, in time, we find ourselves locked in by the very defenses we have constructed for our own protection”.

~ Laura Lipsky

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“All life is interrelated.
 We are all caught in an inescapable
 network of mutuality, tied into a single
 garment of destiny.
 Whatever affects one destiny,
 affects all indirectly.”

~ Martin Luther King, Jr.



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When in a chronic state of stress, we are unable to access the healthy parts of our brain which allow us to make good decisions.

Our stress response system is in a state of high arousal. We are in our brain stem and focusing on survival and not creative thought.

Our actions are reactions....

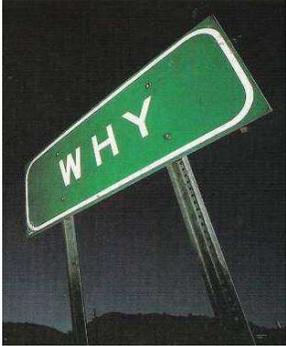
There are several ways to connect ourselves back to our thinking part of our brain instead of our reacting part.

And one way starts with the practice of looking inward ... getting more connected to ourselves.

Inquiry is the first step....

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1. Why am I doing the work that I'm doing?



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2. Think of that difficult dynamic or situation.

Have I been here before?
If so, what do I have to learn?



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3. My actions and choices....

Is this working for me?

How does it work for me?

Why does it work for me?

Given all of this, am I doing my work with integrity?



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4. Where is your attention...?

Where am I putting my focus?

What am I attending to?



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"There is great power in understanding that we can change the way we interact with circumstances in our lives, simply by being intentional about where we put our focus. Daniel Siegel and Jack Kornfield, one a scientist and the other a Buddhist monk, are beginning to teach this as they combine the latest in brain physiology research with the oldest of mindfulness practices. They explain that the way you pay attention activates parts of your brain in very specific ways, and that this brain firing actually leads to structural changes in the brain itself. In other words, there is a real likelihood that with time and practice, a temporary, intentionally created mindful state will become a lasting mental trait. However small the ways in which we bring awareness to where we're putting our focus may seem, they can lead to large changes in our experience of life. William James, a pioneering American philosopher and psychologist who was trained as a medical doctor, said, "My experience is what I agree to attend to."

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5. It's a choice
(and a sacred
privilege)
to do what we do.

What is my Plan-B?



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6. Building compassion and community



Who are my people?

Where do I go to feel good
and refuel?



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7. Compassion is the feeling that arises when you are confronted with another's suffering and feel motivated to relieve that suffering.



When we feel compassion, our heart rate slows down, we secrete the “bonding hormone” oxytocin, and regions of the brain linked to empathy, caregiving, and feelings of pleasure light up, which often results in our wanting to approach and care for other people.

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8. Finding balance

Is there such a thing as
life outside of work?



YES!!!!

What is that for me...?

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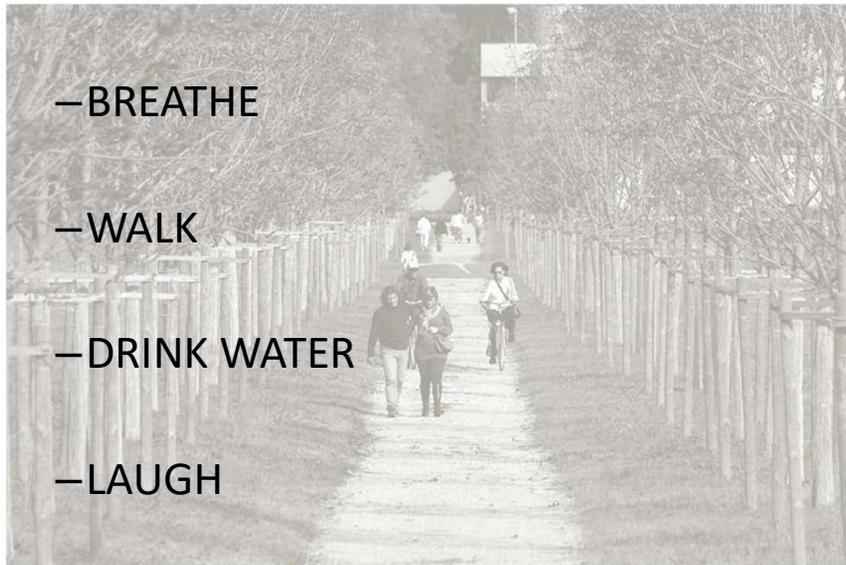
9. Moving energy....

–BREATHE

–WALK

–DRINK WATER

–LAUGH



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10. GRATITUDE!

There is ALWAYS something to be grateful for...

“The root of joy is gratefulness.”
-David Steindl-Rast

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11. A daily practice of centering ourselves...

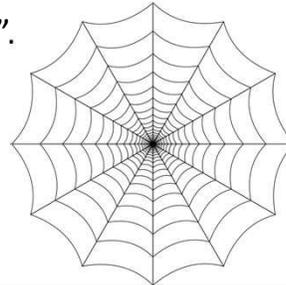
- What is my intention today?
- At the end of the day, what can I put down?



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“Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect”.

~ Chief Seattle



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Daily practice of reflection:

- I will care for my part of the web by....
- I refrain from doing harm to the web by....
- Who are you struggling with right now that you can see as your teacher?
- How are you moving energy through you?
- Where am I putting my focus?
Can I shift perspective?



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“ We do not see
things as
they are.
We see them
as we are”.

~ Talmud



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“Between stimulus and response,
there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose
our response.
In our response lies our growth and
our freedom.”

— Viktor E. Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning



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Thoughts?
Comments?
Questions?



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