

## BEING GOOD TO OURSELVES

### QRTP Infosheet: Issue Thirteen

Social work is a rewarding and challenging profession, with those in the workforce frequently exposed to high volumes of clients experiencing ongoing trauma and violence. Clinicians working in child welfare and child protective services are responsible for assessing and preventing risk and maintaining the safety of children and adolescents. Research suggests service providers addressing child abuse and neglect may experience a myriad of negative effects because of their work in the field.<sup>1</sup> While many report satisfaction with their work, clinicians working in child welfare are at risk of developing secondary traumatic stress (STS) because of their work. Individuals affected by STS can also experience changes in their worldview, which often is referred to as vicarious trauma. According to research from 2020, an estimated 15%-35% of social workers experience symptoms of secondary traumatic stress<sup>2</sup> STS is a trauma-related stress reaction and set of symptoms resulting from exposure to another individual's traumatic experience rather than from exposure directly to a traumatic event.<sup>3</sup>

#### Who Is at Risk?

Although typically supervisors think that staff who have direct interaction with clients are at highest risk for developing secondary traumatic stress—given the pervasive presence of trauma in child welfare work—all staff in child welfare agencies are at risk, including residential centers. Any professional who works directly with traumatized children and is able to hear the recounting of traumatic experiences, is at risk for secondary traumatic stress. In fact, staff whose roles are supportive—receptionists, drivers, maintenance workers, volunteers, among others—may be at higher risk because of a lack of opportunity to process the stories they hear as part of their jobs with clinically trained supervisors. Some child welfare staff at all levels may have chosen to go into a helping profession because of their own history of trauma. While such experiences can be a source of strength and a basis for empathetic connection with clients, they can also make people more vulnerable to developing secondary traumatic stress symptoms.<sup>4</sup> Organizations, too, can show signs of traumatic stress.

#### How Does it Affect Us?

Not all child welfare staff who work with traumatized children, youth and their families will be impacted. Personal experiences may put some staff at higher risk of STS. Child welfare staff who describe their work environments as supportive report less STS. Oftentimes, signs of STS go unnoticed while they are occurring. As secondary traumatic stress plays out on both the individual and organizational levels, supervisors and administrators should recognize its warning signs on both fronts.

Some examples of how secondary traumatic stress may impact individuals may include:

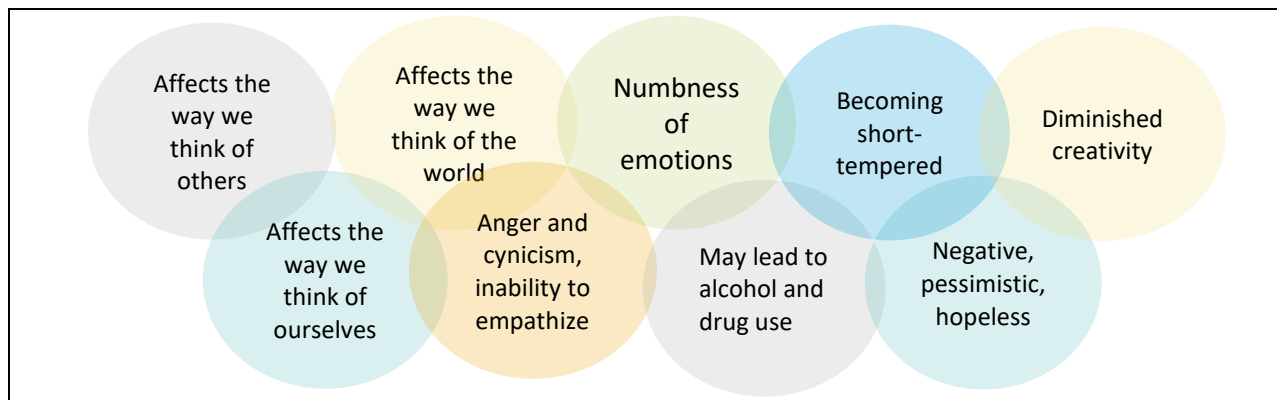
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<sup>1</sup> Secondary trauma and impairment in clinical social workers. S. Armes, J. Lee, B. Bride, D. Seponski. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol 110 Part 3 December 2020

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services, *Treatment Improvement Protocol 57, SAMHSA, 2014*

<sup>4</sup> Secondary Trauma and Child Welfare Staff: A Guidance for Supervisors and Administrators, *National Child Traumatic Stress Network*



### Suggestions to Help Prevent the Effects of Vicarious Trauma<sup>5</sup>

- Anticipate that you will experience vicarious trauma.
- Develop self-awareness to recognize how your thoughts, beliefs, and interactions are shifting both at work and at home.
- Commit to following an action plan of self-care for your emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being.
- Care for your physical health by following a proper diet, getting adequate sleep, and engaging in physical activities such as walking, dancing, playing, or yoga.
- Care for your psychological health by knowing your limitations and your level of tolerance; keep boundaries that you set for yourself and others and identify triggers that may affect you.
- Use mind, body, and spiritual practices to support your wellness like music, humor, and art. to process your emotional responses; seek therapy to provide you a space for processing; try alternative therapeutic approaches such as yoga, mindfulness, meditation, drumming, horseback riding, forest bathing, art therapy, guided imagery and tapping.

### Trauma-Informed Agencies

The following concepts are essential for creating a trauma-informed system that will adequately address secondary traumatic stress. Specifically, the trauma-informed system must:<sup>6</sup>

<b>Recognize the impact of secondary trauma on the workforce.</b>
<b>Recognize that exposure to trauma is a risk of the job of serving traumatized children, youth and their families.</b>
<b>Understand that trauma can shape the culture of organizations in the same way that trauma shapes the world view of individuals.</b>
Understand that a traumatized organization is less likely to effectively identify its clients’ past trauma or mitigate or prevent future trauma.
Integrate trauma-informed care principles into meaningful action, policies, and improvements in practice.
Be integrated into direct services, programs, policies, and procedures, staff development and training, and other activities directed at secondary traumatic stress (STS).

<sup>5</sup> Trauma-Informed Approaches: Promising Practices and Protocols for Ohio’s Domestic Violence Programs, *Fourth Edition 2019*

<sup>6</sup> Understanding Who is at Risk, *National Child Traumatic Stress Network*, [Introduction | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(nctsn.org\)](https://www.nctsn.org/)

## RESOURCES

### 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline

Ohioans who are experiencing a mental health or addiction crisis and their family members can call, chat or text 988 to reach a trained counselor who can offer help and support.

### Ohio Mental Health and Addiction Services

- Crisis Text Line – Text 4Hope to 741 741 for free, confidential conversation  
[Crisis Text Line | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services \(ohio.gov\)](#)
- Ohio Careline (1-800-720-9616) for free, confidential connection to licensed provider  
[Ohio CareLine | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services](#)
- OhioMHAS Get Help for a variety of resources on control connection, and meaning  
[Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services | Ohio.gov](#)
- Resources  
[Resources | Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services \(ohio.gov\)](#)

### Being Good to Ourselves Attachment

The Being Good to Ourselves Attachment that accompanies this Infosheet, was developed in Collaboration with the Ohio Department of Developmental Disabilities and provides 10 Tips for Preventing and Addressing Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS).

### National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) was created by Congress in 2000 as part of the Children’s Health Act to raise the standard of care and increase access to services for children and families who experience or witness traumatic events. This unique network of frontline providers, family members, researchers, and national partners is committed to changing the course of children’s lives by improving their care and moving scientific gains quickly into practice across the U.S. NCTSN recognizes that the development of [secondary traumatic stress](#) is a common occupational hazard for professionals working with traumatized children.

### The Wellness Project

[The Wellness Project](#) is a multimedia, multi-experiential collection of resources and practices to support and enhance your individual and organizational wellness and resilience. The purpose of this website is to discover a variety of ways for supporting helping professionals, so they can show up as the “best version of themselves.” It includes a holistic system of wellness activities such as reading, listening, watching, cooking, connecting, moving, breathing, and resting.