

# Understanding Secondary Traumatic Stress and the Importance of Professional Wellbeing

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## Introductory Reflection

Please answer two of the reflection questions below while centering on what brought you here, your intention for learning, and your beliefs surrounding self-care.

1. What are your experienced symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress?
2. How do you know it is time for you to take a break?
3. In what ways are you currently taking care of yourself?
4. What are your views on ways professional well-being impacts professional outcomes?

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## Training Objectives

As a result of this course, you will:

1. Be able to identify symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress.
2. Recognize and assess your own levels of secondary trauma exposure in the workplace.
3. Identify mindfulness techniques to reduce symptoms of secondary traumatic stress including mindfulness-based self-care.
4. Develop your own self-care strategies for professional wellness.

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## Self-care as a helping professional

You are the vehicle in which the work is done. It all comes from your energy, wisdom, and action!

Your wellbeing impacts your effectiveness as a helping professional.

Consider:

What ethical issues may arise if you are distracted by imbalance, exhaustion, secondary trauma, or personally challenging experiences?

How is your work impacted when you are feeling depleted, unwell, or tired?

How do you feel about your work when self-care is neglected?

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## Understanding Stress Responses and Secondary Traumatic Stress

AS HELPING PROFESSIONALS

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## Stress and the Brain

➤ Fight, flight, or freeze responses can arise due to being stuck in traffic, feeling overwhelmed at work, or worrying about finances or health. Our brains do not decipher real crisis from perceived crisis!

➤ How we respond has less to do with the actual event than how we make meaning of the event (Siegel, 2001).

➤ "If your brain perceives danger even when there isn't an imminent physical threat and this automatic reaction occurs repeatedly and remains unchecked, your level of stress can build over time" (Stahl & Goldstein, 2010).

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## Stress and the Mind-Body Connection

What happens when we have a stress response?

During times of perceived stress the body produces hormones such as cortisol, and neurotransmitters such as epinephrine and norepinephrine as a result of evolution.

Then: Bear Attack

Now: Traffic Jam



<https://www.nps.gov/develop/learnmore.htm> (2018, July 25)

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## Stress and the Autonomic Nervous System

> When cortisol and neurotransmitters (epinephrine and norepinephrine) surge through your body, you can go into a hyper-adrenaline overdrive which can weaken the immune system leaving you less able to fight off disease.

> The autonomic nervous system works at an involuntary level to regulate the brain, heart, respiration, internal organ functioning and glands. It's made of two pathways: the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system. (Stahl & Goldstein, 2010).

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## Stress and the Body

The sympathetic nervous system kicks in when the body wants to take action against a threat.

This looks like:

- Shallow breathing.
- Increased heart rate and blood pressure.
- Release of endorphins to numb pain.
- Immune, digestive, and reproductive systems slow down or temporarily come to a halt.

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## Stress and the Body

If the brain thinks a situation is hopeless the body will go into the freeze response activating the parasympathetic nervous system.

This looks like:

- Low blood pressure.
- Low heart rate.
- Fainting.

The brain doesn't distinguish between psychological danger and physiological danger (Siegel, 2001). Something as simple as waiting in line at the grocery store can set off the same stress reactions as being in a car accident.

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## Stress and the Body

When we experience daily, prolonged stress the body doesn't have the chance to rebalance which contributes to high blood pressure, muscle tension, skin ailments, anxiety, insomnia, gastrointestinal and digestive disorders, and suppressed immune system.

What if you had the capacity to reduce your stress reactions and learn to respond to them in a more constructive way? How would your well-being improve?

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## Secondary Traumatic Stress

Also called vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue.

Secondary traumatic stress is "the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another. Its symptoms mimic those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Individuals affected by secondary traumatic stress may find themselves re-experiencing personal trauma or notice an increase in arousal and avoidance reactions related to the indirect trauma exposure. They may also experience changes in memory and perception; alterations in their sense of self-efficacy; a depletion of personal resources; and disruption in their perceptions of safety, trust, and independence."

<http://www.nctsn.org/resources/topics/secondary-traumatic-stress> (2019, April 17).

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## Secondary Traumatic Stress

Refers to the experiences of people, usually professionals, "who are exposed to others' traumatic stories and as a result can develop their own traumatic symptoms and reactions."  
Both direct and indirect exposure leads to occupational stress.



<https://www.pinterest.com/angelicaj156/najim-zehot/> (2018, April 17)

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## Exposure to STS

- Death
- Child Abuse/Neglect
- Aggression/Hostility
- Violence
- Substance Abuse
- Child Sexual Abuse
- Workplace bullying/mistreatment
- Witnessing Physical Violence or being subjected to physical violence yourself

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## Identifying Symptoms of STS

As a result of repeated exposure to potentially traumatic events, one may be more apt to avoid reminders of past cases, over- or under-react to potential hazards to themselves or to clients, and experience factionalism and a lack of collaboration with their supervisors and colleagues.

Feelings of helplessness, reduced perspectives and critical thinking skills, negative world views and difficulty recognizing and monitoring emotions and reactivity are some symptoms of STS.

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### Symptoms of STS Continued

- Hypervigilance
- Hopelessness
- Inability to embrace complexity
- Inability to listen
- Avoidance of clients
- Anger and cynicism
- Sleeplessness
- Porcupine Syndrome
- Physical ailments
- Minimizing
- Guilt
- Avoidance of supervision
- Chronic tardiness
- Missing work
- Chronic exhaustion
- Fear

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### Self-Care Practices

FOR HELPING PROFESSIONALS

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The nature of our work requires the healthy functioning of our holistic self.

- Spiritual
- Emotional
- Intellectual
- Physical
- Social
- Environmental
- Financial



<http://www.surreywellness.com/tag/physical-health/> (2019, April 17)

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## Professional Quality of Life Assessment

□ Please take a few minutes to answer the Professional Quality of Life Assessment in your materials.

□ Assess your Compassion Satisfaction, Burnout, and Secondary Traumatic Stress scores.

[https://proqol.org/uploads/ProQOL\\_5\\_English\\_Self-Score\\_3-2012.pdf](https://proqol.org/uploads/ProQOL_5_English_Self-Score_3-2012.pdf) (2019, April 17)

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## What is Mindfulness?

“Man is not fully conditioned and determined but rather determines himself whether he gives into conditions or stands up to them. In other words, man is ultimately self determining. Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment.” – Viktor Frankl

- > Between stimulus and response there is space. In that space, you have the power to choose a response. In your response, lies your growth, freedom, and possibility.
- > In mindfulness-based approaches the self is viewed as the witness or observer of experiences.
- > Buddhist teaching asks the individual to reflect on the apparent self. The self is the observer. (Cook-Cottone, 2015).

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## Mindfulness is:

- > A non-judgmental awareness centered in the present moment. (McLean, 2012)
- > Letting your mind be full with the experience in the here and now.
- > Allowing for a direct experience of life. (McLean, 2013)
- > The space between stimulus and response.
- > The practice of moment to moment nonjudgmental awareness brings focus to whatever is happening in the moment.
- > It is only in the present moment that you can make changes.

When you notice your tendencies and reactions you can begin to make new choices that promote well-being and balance. You can choose a different way of being when you become aware of how you have always been.

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## Mindfulness and Stress Reduction

Through intention and thoughts our mind is the creator of our own happiness or unhappiness. When we choose our thoughts we choose our life.

1. Intention shapes our thoughts and words.
  2. Thoughts and words mold our actions.
  3. Thoughts, words, and actions shape our behaviors.
  4. Behaviors sculpt our bodily expressions.
  5. Bodily expressions fashion our character.
  6. Our character hardens into what we look like. (Stahl. B. & Goldstein, E., 2010).
- Are you aware of how stress affects you? How do you choose to allow stress to affect you?

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## Mindful Self-Awareness of Everyday Stress

- Consider how often minor daily stresses affect your thoughts and emotions, which then also affect your body.
  - How many times a day do you feel stress? In what ways do you feel stress?
  - While daily stressors appear minor the stress responses in our thoughts and bodies can result in distress and disease.
- "One of the gifts that mindfulness offers is helping you recognize that there are choices in how you respond to any stressful situation" (Stahl & Goldstein, 2010).

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## Using Mindfulness Techniques for Stress Reduction

Informal Mindfulness is about paying attention to your life! What does that look like?:

- Waking in the morning with an awareness that you are waking up. Notice the room. Notice how you feel. Think of something you're grateful for today.
- When you bathe pay attention to the smell of the soap, the temperature of the water, the sounds around you.
- When you are in conversation with another, notice their face, listen to the meaning of their words, respond with patience rather than rushing.
- When walking to your car, notice how it feels to walk. Observe the environment around you. Listen to surrounding sounds.
- When working, focus on the task at hand. Resist temptation to pick up another task simultaneously like responding to email while in a meeting.

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## Using Mindfulness Techniques for Stress Reduction

Formal Mindfulness is an intentional time-in to pay attention to breathing, thoughts, and present moment stillness. What does that look like?:

- > Mindful breathing
- > Mindful sitting
- > Mindful walking
- > Mindful body scan
- > Mindful yoga/movement
- > Mindful meditation
- > Mindful eating

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## Everyday Mindfulness

Mindfulness can be practiced in two ways:

- > **Formal Mindfulness:** taking time out each day to intentionally sit, stand, lie down and focus on breathing, body sensations, sounds, thoughts, or emotions. This may include yoga or meditation.
- > **Informal Mindfulness:** bringing mindful awareness to daily activities like eating, exercising, chores, relating to others, (basically any action in any setting!) This includes paying close attending to your senses as you move through your daily life.

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## Meditation

Meditation is:

- > a technique for quieting the mind and nervous system.
- > a practice for cultivating an expanded state of non-judgmental awareness.
- > a natural state of deep rest. (McLean 2012).
- > **Your Willingness** - "No matter how long you have been practicing, begin with a beginner's mind. Beginner's mind is a quality of awareness that allows you to see things as if you have never seen them before. You notice your experience with openness and curiosity." (Cook-Cottone, 2015).
- > **An Object of Focus** - This may be a mantra or positive affirmation, or listening mindfully to a guided meditation.
- > **Gentle Attention** - Have an anchor to return to when thoughts enter during meditation. Your breath is an excellent anchor. Your breath brings you fully into the present moment and draws your attention inward.

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## Meditation Resources

"With an in-breath, you bring your mind back to your body. In this way you become alive in the here and now. Joy, peace, and happiness are possible. You have an appointment that is in the here and now." (Hahn, 2001).

- > Insight Timer – Meditation App
- > Calm – Meditation App
- > Headspace – Meditation App
- > Buddhify – Meditation App
- > Smiling Mind – Meditation App
- > Take a Break – Meditation App

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## Creative Self-Care for Helping Professionals

- > Practicing loving-kindness meditation (metta).
- > Practicing self-compassion.
- > "I am" journaling.
- > Gratitude reflective writing.
- > Peer support for self-care practices.
- > Mindful Movement.
- > Playing (coloring, playdough, puzzles, bubbles, side-walk chalk).
- > Reading, writing, watching content that is positive, relatable, healing.
- > Mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques.

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## Resources on Mindfulness and Self-Care for Helping Professionals




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