

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Listening to the traumatic stories of others can result in a negative impact called Secondary Traumatic Stress. Other terms used interchangeably with this one are Secondary Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Secondary Traumatization, and Compassion Fatigue.

Risk Factors for Secondary Traumatic Stress

Peer responders will be exposed to the traumatic stories of others and therefore are at risk for secondary traumatic stress. The risk for secondary traumatic stress increases with the presence of the following factors:

- High levels of cumulative stress
- Inordinate focus on work
- Lack of spiritual maturity
- Prior unresolved trauma
- Poor relationships
- Inflexible worldview

Self-Assessment Questions

Self-awareness is an important aspect of preventing long term impact of secondary traumatic stress. Peer responders are encouraged to ask themselves the following questions as way of determining personal health. The answers to these questions can help the peer responder to identify areas that may need strengthening and to further develop a self-care strategy.¹

- How well am I staying in contact with important people in my life?
- How am I doing at finding things to make me laugh or bring me joy?
- How free am I to let myself cry?
- How am I doing with making time for prayer, meditation, and reflection?
- How open am I to spiritual input and am I getting what I need?
- How much time am I taking to relax and chat with co-workers?
- How strong is and how much do I access my network of supportive friends?
- How much time do I spend in self-inventory or reflection?
- How am I doing with reasonable work hours and vacations?
- How am I doing with exercising regularly and eating healthily?

Additional Resource:

¹ Peer Responder Self-Care Strategies (11.4)

Signs of Secondary Traumatic Stress

Secondary traumatic stress can impact our behavior, emotions, bodies, relationships, thoughts, and spiritual lives. Possible signs of secondary traumatic stress include:

Behavior:

Withdrawn
 Hypervigilant
 Easily Startled
 Perfectionistic
 Increase in mistakes
 Accident prone
 Low motivation

Emotions:

Anxiety
 Guilt
 Anger
 Apathy
 Moody
 Sad
 Overwhelmed

Bodies:

Sweating
 Dizziness
 Nightmares
 Aches/Pains
 Rapid heartbeat
 Exhaustion
 Sleeplessness

Relationships:

Intolerance
 Loneliness
 Isolation
 Impatient
 Irritable
 Conflicts
 Resist help from others

Thoughts:

Confusion
 Disorientation
 Self-critical
 Negativity
 Distracted
 Obsessive thinking

Spiritual:

Loss of purpose
 Anger at God
 Questioning Beliefs
 Loss of hope
 Loss of Joy