

Secondary Trauma

Working with young people, especially in roles like education, counselling, social work, and healthcare, can be rewarding, but it can also expose individuals to the risk of experiencing secondary trauma. Secondary trauma, vicarious trauma, burnout or compassion fatigue, is the emotional and psychological distress that can result from hearing about or witnessing the traumatic experiences of others.

Here are some guidelines and information for professionals who work with young people to understand and manage secondary trauma:

- **Emotional Exhaustion:** One of the primary signs of secondary trauma is emotional exhaustion. You may feel drained, overwhelmed, and emotionally depleted as a result of your work with young people who have experienced trauma. This exhaustion can manifest as feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.
- **Increased Stress:** Secondary trauma can lead to elevated levels of stress. You may find yourself constantly on edge, feeling anxious or worried about the young people you work with, and experiencing a heightened state of arousal.
- **Irritability and Anger:** As a result of the emotional toll, you may become more irritable and prone to outbursts of anger or frustration. Small stressors that wouldn't typically bother you may become more significant triggers.
- **Sleep Disturbances:** Secondary trauma can disrupt your sleep patterns. You may have trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or experiencing restful sleep, which can further contribute to your feelings of exhaustion.



- **Intrusive Thoughts:** You might find that the traumatic stories or experiences of the young people you work with intrude into your thoughts even when you're not at work. These intrusive thoughts can be distressing and make it challenging to disconnect from your work.
- **Heightened Emotional Reactivity:** Secondary trauma can lead to heightened emotional reactions. You may become more sensitive and reactive to emotional triggers, even outside of your work environment. This can impact your ability to manage your own emotions.
- **Physical Symptoms:** Some professionals may experience physical symptoms such as headaches, gastrointestinal issues, or changes in appetite due to the stress and emotional toll of secondary trauma.
- **Disengagement:** Secondary trauma can cause professionals to disengage or become emotionally detached as a defense mechanism. You may find it challenging to connect with or invest emotionally in your work with young people.
- **Avoidance:** Professionals may consciously or unconsciously avoid situations or conversations related to the traumatic experiences of the young people they work with to protect themselves from emotional distress.
- **Decreased Job Satisfaction:** You may experience a decrease in job satisfaction or a loss of enthusiasm for your work as a result of secondary trauma. This can lead to burnout and a sense of disillusionment.



Recognising these signs is the first step in addressing secondary trauma. By acknowledging your own emotional responses and behaviour changes, you can take proactive steps to manage the impact and seek the support and self-care strategies necessary to maintain your well-being and continue to support the young people in your care.