SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS CONSORTIUM

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INDIVIDUAL GUIDELINES

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #1: INDIVIDUAL PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

Target:

The professional possesses evidence-informed knowledge about risks and strategies for mitigating secondary traumatic stress (STS).

Education about STS is essential to prepare the professional to anticipate exposure, to monitor their responses, and to know what actions to take when reactions are observed. Professionals (with support from their organization) participate in on-going, evidence-informed education and training on trauma and STS, the risks associated with secondary trauma exposure, and ways to enhance their own resiliency.

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #2: SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Target:

The professional will develop the ability to employ specific strategies for remaining within a zone of tolerance during exposure and recovery after reactivity.

Professionals working in trauma-exposed environments need to develop specific emotion regulation and recovery skills to remain within a zone of tolerance and maintain well-being as they are exposed to secondary trauma. These skills include those that prepare them for secondary trauma exposure, as well as skills that support emotion regulation during exposure, and skills to assist them in emotional recovery after exposure. Professionals need to develop the ability to:

1. Continuously assess the presence of signs or symptoms of secondary trauma.
2. Employ the strategies identified in a personal risk assessment (see Guideline Statement #4) when indicated.
3. Support emotion regulation during exposure (e.g., using self-talk, active coping strategies, problem-solving, mindful compassion/self-compassion, breathing techniques).
4. Recover from episodes of high-intensity emotion (e.g., employing grounding skills, breathing techniques, mindfulness approaches).
5. Reflect upon, acknowledge, and articulate high-intensity emotion experiences to trusted peers or supervisors as appropriate.

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #3: BELIEFS/ATTITUDES/VALUES

Target:

The professional is able to cultivate and maintain beliefs that support their sense of well-being in their helping role.

Certain professional beliefs, attitudes, and values play a protective role for professionals exposed to secondary trauma. This requires that professionals define, cultivate, and enact specific beliefs and values that impart a sense of meaning, purpose, self-compassion, and openness to the difficult emotions and experiences that their role requires. This requires that the professional be able to:

1. Describe the importance of finding personal meaning in experiencing emotional distress from trauma work.
2. Define their own sense of purpose (professional calling) in seeking and accepting their current job role.
3. Make an active determination about their goodness of fit in their job role and in the organization.
4. Experience—or actively endeavor to cultivate—compassion for the client and self in difficult circumstances.
5. Frequently experience and express gratitude for aspects of their job role (e.g., the support of their co-workers, the significance of the job role, gratitude of clients).
6. Experience and express optimism about the effect of their efforts, a belief that what they do matters.
7. Accept the limits and boundaries of their professional role and accept the reality that some difficult circumstances may be beyond their influence.

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #4: REFLECTION/SELF AWARENESS

Target:

The professional has identified their own personal profile of strengths and vulnerabilities to secondary trauma exposure for use in self-monitoring.

Preparation for exposure to secondary trauma requires that professionals know their own strengths and vulnerabilities in response to that experience. Professionals are able to reflect and identify what these strengths and vulnerabilities are in order to anticipate what thoughts and behaviors they should self-monitor, and what circumstances are most likely to activate their own emotional arousal.

- Examples of vulnerabilities include: own individual and/or collective history of trauma, areas of their own emotional susceptibility, non-supportive or difficult work environment, and how their own experiences of equity, diversity, and inclusion might impact their response to work-related trauma exposure.

- Examples of strengths include: strong support from supervisors or peers, history of rapid resolution of stress response, and good capacity for self-reflection.

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #5: TEAM SUPPORT

Target:

The professional collaborates on a team of trusted colleagues, peers, or a community of practice with whom they can share thoughts and feelings concerning secondary trauma exposure.

It is important that professionals not be exposed to secondary trauma in isolation. Professional well-being requires that the professional acknowledge and process their thoughts and feelings in response to trauma exposure with a trusted other. This processing should be done in a manner that does not unnecessarily subject others to graphic traumatic material. It is important that the professional has a sense of the support of a team (internal or external to the workplace), and that they help to create and sustain a practice of reciprocal support.

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #6: OVERSIGHT OF WELL-BEING

Target:

In addition to team and organizational support, the professional possesses the willingness and capability to monitor their own well-being and uses strategies for mediating secondary trauma responses.

Professional well-being requires that the individual has the support of their organization and supervisor, but also that the professional be committed to consciously attending to their own physical and emotional health. The professional is able to continuously self-monitor the effect that their work is having on their sense of well-being, and that they actively respond whenever distress occurs. The professional possesses the capability to:

1. Identify strategies and opportunities for self-monitoring.

2. Articulate the effects of secondary trauma exposure on them personally.

3. Implement identified strategies for emotional regulation that occur in response to exposure.

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #7: EXTERNAL PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Target:

The professional is able to determine when they would benefit from professional counseling or other external support and knows how to access that support.

When reactions to secondary trauma exposure begin to compromise the professional's well-being, knowledgeable professional support external to the workplace is indicated. In this circumstance, the professional seeks help from a trauma-informed mental health professional or spiritual or cultural support as needed. The professional is able to:

1. Identify—on self-reflection or in consultation with a trusted other—when external support is indicated.

2. Access such support.

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ORGANIZATIONAL GUIDELINES

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #1: ORGANIZATIONAL POLICIES, PROTOCOLS, AND PRACTICES

Target:

The organization has policies and active practices, including structuring workflow to minimize secondary trauma exposure and active strategies for promoting workforce resilience, which demonstrate commitment to the well-being of its workforce.

Organizations must demonstrate their awareness of and commitment to the well-being of staff exposed to secondary trauma. This commitment is communicated and demonstrated through the implementation of policies, protocols, and practices that promote workforce wellness stabilization and recovery.

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #2: ORGANIZATIONAL TRAINING

Target:

The organization has processes in place for providing on-going training concerning the nature of secondary traumatic stress (STS), the causes, and strategies for mitigation of secondary trauma. This training is culturally responsive and evidence-informed. The training process includes advanced training to enable supervisors to provide continuous support to workers.

Organizations must provide training and consultation that assist staff in understanding, preparing for, and dealing with secondary trauma exposure. Organizational support of exposed staff requires training that includes the following elements or characteristics:

1. Is ongoing training and consultation and includes all levels of staff.
2. Provides information that normalizes responses to secondary trauma exposure.
3. Enables a common understanding of the characteristics and risks of work in a trauma-exposed environment.
4. Includes information about the psychobiology of stress and trauma.
5. Provides clear strategies to mitigate stress and trauma responses and to enhance resiliency.

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GUIDELINE STATEMENT #2: ORGANIZATIONAL TRAINING (CONTINUED)

6. Includes specialized additional training resources for senior leaders and supervisors guiding trauma-exposed teams. This will support leaders' ability to mitigate and address the common risks for adverse stress consequences to individual team members, promote reflective practice, and enhance team functioning and client services.
7. Includes a wide range of specialized training and education resources that are culturally sensitive and responsive, and that include evidence-informed resilience tools and strategies to support individuals, teams, supervisors, and managers.

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #3: WORKFORCE SUPPORT

Target:

The organization has structured workloads to mitigate the secondary trauma exposure of the workplace. This structure includes flexible time for supervision and peer support processing, wellness activities, and training.

Organizations must systematically define and implement organizational workforce supports to reduce the risk of STS and increase staff wellness and resilience. Examples of such supports include:

1. Committing to organizational stress mitigation: Examples include formally allotting time in staff's daily schedules for risk reduction and skills-building activities; developing procedures and setting aside time for trauma processing with a peer or supervisor; encouraging staff wellness activities; allowing for periodic staff training; and soliciting input from workers about helpful supports and responses to specific critical incidents.
2. Providing critical workforce resources, such as specific Employee Assistance Program (EAP) providers trained in STS who can provide clear support for workers experiencing provider distress and supervisors and organizational leadership who are also trained in STS.
3. Providing resources, such as organizational wellness programming, team-building, and focused efforts to create supportive work environments.

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #4: ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Target:

The organization explicitly nurtures a culture of psychological safety that acknowledges the hazards of working in a trauma-exposed environment and fosters team support and respect for personal boundaries.

Organizations must create and nurture a culture and climate that explicitly and implicitly:

1. Supports and ensures the physical safety and well-being of all staff.
2. Assures psychological safety for all employees.
3. Recognizes and acknowledges the challenges and hazards of working in trauma-exposed environments.
4. Recognizes and responds to the intersection of STS, culture, race, gender, and historical trauma requiring systemic change.
5. Fosters a sense of organizational cohesion, reflexivity, active listening, and mutual support.
6. Communicates the scope of the professional role and promotes healthy boundaries at work.

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #5: SUPERVISION

Target:

The organization dedicates time and supports for the provision of qualified secondary trauma-informed supervision.

A critical support that an organization can provide staff is the support and direction of a supervisor who is secondary trauma-informed. Accordingly, organizations will provide supervisors who are trained and equipped to:

1. Identify supervisees who may be experiencing secondary trauma exposure and/or STS symptoms.
2. Create the space and structure to process these experiences in a supportive and encouraging manner that normalizes the experience.
3. Acknowledge, recognize, and address the impact of STS on themselves.
4. Use tools to ensure supervision is STS-informed.
5. Make referrals for additional support as needed.

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #6: PRACTICES OF LEADERS

Target:

Organizational leaders model trauma and secondary trauma-informed behaviors and play an active role in developing a supportive and resilient workplace.

The practices of organizational leadership model awareness and promotion of wellness activities, which begins by leaders accepting an active role in the establishment of organizational awareness and promotion of a trauma-informed and compassionate workplace. Trauma-informed organizational practice includes applying trauma-informed principles to all staff as well as clients.

GUIDELINE STATEMENT #7: ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENTS AND MONITORING

Target:

The organization demonstrates the prioritization of workforce wellness through defined metrics that are continuously monitored, safeguarded for privacy, and responded to with priority.

As a means of prioritizing employee wellness and implementing continual organizational oversight, organizations will identify data and specific measures to continuously assess employee and organizational wellness. This includes tracking indicators that could be related to STS, such as staff turnover, absenteeism, and avoidance of trauma-related material. As a means of keeping the organizational effort a priority, the outcomes of these continuous measures will be prominent in the organization's data reports. Data collection and reporting must always respect issues of confidentiality and the privacy of the employee.