



Best Practices for Addressing Secondary Traumatic Stress

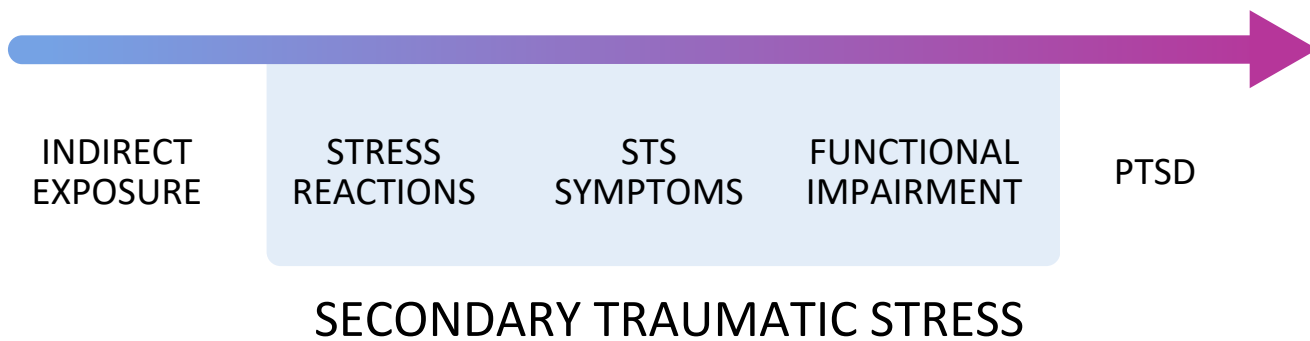
PRINCIPLES FOR INDIVIDUALS & ORGANIZATIONS

Research has established that STS is an occupational hazard for those who provide mental health services to trauma-exposed populations. Mental health professionals and paraprofessionals indirectly exposed to trauma are at risk of experiencing STS symptoms. STS is associated with negative outcomes among providers such as functional impairment and poor physical health. High rates of STS within an organization can negatively affect organizational culture and climate and the quality and effectiveness of services provided by that organization.

The responsibility for STS prevention has historically on the at-risk individuals. However, there have been calls for organizational efforts to lessen STS. A recently convened expert panel stated that STS prevention and intervention efforts must be dually focused on individual and organizational level targets. There is now general agreement that a two-pronged STS prevention approach that includes both individual level and organizational level strategies is necessary. There remains a need to identify the core components for both levels. The Secondary Traumatic Stress Consortium undertook a process to identify expert consensus principles for practice with individuals and organizations. The principles are meant to reduce STS in behavioral health professionals. The principles presented here are the result of that process and were developed with the following assumptions:

- The principles are targeted at professionals and organizations in the domain of mental and behavioral health services.
- The specific language/wording used in these principles is intentional and utilized to be consistent with the targeting of mental health professionals and organizations. However, with relevant modifications to the language/wording the principles are applicable to a wide variety of professions and fields of practices.
- The principles are intricately linked both within and across individual and organizational domains. Thus, individuals and organizations should aspire to embody each principle that is applicable in the context in which they operate. Some principles may not apply depending on the individual and/or group context.

- STS is defined as the strain placed on a person when that person is exposed to trauma descriptions, trauma images, or the reactions and responses of persons who have experienced primary trauma.
- STS is further conceptualized as being on a continuum that begins with normative stress and extends to functional impairment and PTSD (see figure below). This concept overlaps and interacts with related concepts such as “compassion fatigue” and “vicarious trauma” and “indirect trauma” but *refers specifically to the strain produced in response to trauma exposure.*



PRINCIPLE #1

INDIVIDUAL

The individual knows the risks for developing and strategies for mitigating STS

Foundational and advanced education about STS is essential to prepare the individual to anticipate exposure, to monitor their responses, and to know what actions to take when reactions are observed. With support from their organization individuals 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.

ORGANIZATIONAL

The organization provides ongoing and advanced STS training that is supported by research and culturally responsive, including training to enable supervisors to provide continuous support to workers

Organizations provide training and consultation that assist staff in understanding, preparing for, and dealing with secondary trauma exposure. Organizational support of trauma exposed staff requires ongoing training in consultation with all levels of staff. Training includes information about the psychobiology of stress and trauma and normalizes responses to secondary trauma exposure. Such training enables a common understanding of the characteristics and risks of work in a trauma-exposed environment, as well as provides clear strategies to mitigate stress and trauma responses and enhance resiliency. Specialized training resources for senior leaders and supervisors guiding trauma-exposed teams must be provided in order to 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. The wide range of specialized training and education resources that are provided are culturally sensitive and responsive and include evidence-informed resilience tools and strategies to support individuals, teams, supervisors, and managers.



PRINCIPLE #2

INDIVIDUAL

The individual cultivates and maintains beliefs that support their sense of well-being in their helping role

Certain beliefs, attitudes, and values play a protective role for staff exposed to secondary trauma. This requires that staff 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).

ORGANIZATIONAL

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 insures psychological and physical safety and well-being for all employees and recognizes and acknowledges the challenges and hazards of working in trauma- exposed environments.

An STS-responsive organizational culture:

1. recognizes and responds to the intersection of STS, culture, race, gender identity and sexual orientation, and historical trauma requiring systemic change;
2. fosters a sense of organizational cohesion, reflexivity, active listening, and mutual support; and
3. communicates the scope of the individual role and promotes healthy boundaries at work.



PRINCIPLE #2 (CONT.)

INDIVIDUAL

The individual cultivates and maintains beliefs that support their sense of well-being in their helping role

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.

ORGANIZATIONAL

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



PRINCIPLE #3

INDIVIDUAL

The individual identifies and monitors their own personal profile of strengths and vulnerabilities to secondary trauma exposure

Preparation for exposure to secondary trauma requires that individuals know their own strengths and vulnerabilities in response to that experience.

- Examples of vulnerabilities include their personal and/or collective history of trauma, areas of their own emotional susceptibility, their employment in a non-supportive or difficult work environment, and how their own identities and any experiences of discrimination or oppression might impact their response to work-related trauma exposure.
- Examples of strengths include strong support from supervisors or peers, ability to regulate after a stressful experience, capacity for self-reflection. Individuals 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.

ORGANIZATIONAL

The organization structures workloads to mitigate the secondary trauma exposure of the workplace

Organizations systematically define and implement organizational workforce supports to reduce the risk of STS and increase staff wellness and resilience.

One such support is a commitment to organizational stress mitigation, including:

1. formally allotting time in daily schedules for risk reduction and skills-building activities;
2. developing flexible procedures and setting aside time for trauma processing with a peer or supervisor;
3. encouraging staff wellness activities;
4. providing ongoing staff training; and
5. soliciting input from workers about helpful supports and responses to specific critical incidents. Organizations must also provide critical workforce resources, such as organizational wellness programming, team-building, and focused efforts to create supportive work environments. Further, in addition to supervisors and organizational leadership who are STS-responsive, access is provided to Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or other external providers trained in STS who can provide clear support for workers experiencing provider distress.



PRINCIPLE #4

INDIVIDUAL

The individual actively monitors their own well-being and uses strategies for mitigating secondary trauma responses

Professional well-being requires that the individual has the support of their organization and supervisor, but also that the individual be committed to consciously attending to their own physical and emotional health. The individual continually self-monitors the effect that their work is having on their sense of well-being, and actively responds whenever distress occurs.

The individual also:

1. identifies strategies and opportunities for self-monitoring;
2. articulates the effects of secondary trauma exposure on them personally; and
3. implements identified strategies for emotional regulation in response to exposure.

ORGANIZATIONAL

The organization demonstrates commitment to the well-being of its workforce through secondary trauma-responsive policies and practices

Organizations actively demonstrate their awareness of and commitment to the well-being of its workers 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. This includes structuring workflow to minimize secondary trauma exposure and active strategies for promoting workforce resilience.



PRINCIPLE #5

INDIVIDUAL

The individual employs specific strategies for remaining within a zone of tolerance during exposure and recovery

Individuals working in trauma-exposed environments 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.

Individuals:

1. continuously assess the presence of signs or symptoms of secondary trauma;
2. employ personal and professional care strategies as indicated;
3. support emotion regulation during exposure, (e.g., positive self-talk, active coping strategies, problem-solving, mindful compassion/self-compassion, breathing techniques);
4. recover from episodes of high-intensity emotion, e.g., grounding skills, breathing techniques, mindfulness approaches; and
5. acknowledge, reflect upon, and articulate high-intensity emotion experiences to trusted peers or supervisors as appropriate.

ORGANIZATIONAL

The organization dedicates time and supports for the provision of qualified, secondary trauma-responsive supervision

A critical support that an organization must provide staff is the support and direction of a supervisor who is STS-responsive.

Accordingly, organizations 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 reactions to trauma exposure 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-responsive; and
5. make referrals for additional support as needed.



PRINCIPLE #6

INDIVIDUAL

The individual 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 the individual not be exposed to secondary trauma in isolation. Individual 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 individual has a sense of the support of a team, and that they help to create and sustain a practice of reciprocal support. Team support may be sought from existing internal teams and/or cultivated external to the organization.

ORGANIZATIONAL

Organizational leaders model trauma and secondary trauma-responsive behaviors and actively develop a supportive and resilient workplace

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



PRINCIPLE #7

INDIVIDUAL

The individual determines when they would benefit from counseling or other external support and accesses 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.

ORGANIZATIONAL

The organization prioritizes 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 identify data and specific measures to continuously assess employee and organizational wellness. This includes tracking indicators 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 are prominent in the organization's data reports. Data collection and reporting always respects issues of confidentiality and the privacy of the employee.



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