

SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

When helping starts to feel traumatic in your own body.

Your nervous system is talking. ♥

Caring for others matters. Caring for yourself makes it sustainable.

1 What is secondary traumatic stress?

Secondary traumatic stress (STS) refers to trauma-like stress responses that can happen after hearing about or witnessing another person's trauma.

It can affect helping professionals who regularly support people experiencing trauma, even when it doesn't happen to us directly.

You don't have to experience the trauma yourself for it to have an impact. ♥



2 Common signs

STS can show up in many ways. You might notice:



Intrusive thoughts

Unwanted images, memories or stories that stick with you.



Irritability

Feeling more reactive, short-tempered or emotionally overwhelmed.



Jumpiness

Feeling easily startled or on edge.



Feeling unsafe

A sense that the world is less safe, even in safe environments.



Sleep disruption

Difficulty falling or staying asleep, troubling dreams.



Strong body reactions

Tension, headaches, stomach issues, or feeling physically unsafe.



Avoiding reminders

Steering clear of conversations, places or media that bring up the trauma.

These are real responses, not personal weaknesses. ♥

3 How it is different from burnout

While burnout develops gradually from chronic workplace stress, STS can feel more sudden and trauma-like, even if it comes from someone else's experience.



STS can have a faster onset.



It often includes trauma-like symptoms (e.g., intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, strong body reactions).



It's linked to exposure to others' trauma, not just workload.

Both are serious and can overlap, but STS may feel more acute and emotionally intense.

4 What helps in the moment

When you're feeling overwhelmed, try these grounding strategies:



Breathe

Slow, deep breaths (e.g., in for 4, hold for 4, out for 6).



Ground yourself

Notice 5 things you can see, 4 you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell, 1 you can taste.



Move

Stretch, walk, or change your position.



Orient to the present

Look around and name what's here now. You are safe in this moment.



Step away

Take a break, even a few minutes, to support your nervous system.



Reach out

Talk to a trusted colleague or supervisor. You don't have to carry it alone.

A regulated you can keep showing up. ♥

5 What helps over time

Longer-term strategies can reduce the impact and build resilience:



Regular supervision

Process what you're hearing and experiencing with a trusted supervisor or consultant.



Debriefing

Structured opportunities to talk about difficult cases or stories.



Therapy or counselling

A safe space to explore your experiences and emotions.



Adequate time off

Take regular breaks, vacations and true downtime.



Limit cumulative exposure

When possible, rotate duties, set boundaries, and be mindful of your overall load.

Sustainable care for others includes sustainable care for you. ♥

6 When to seek more support

Consider reaching out for professional support if you experience:



Persistent symptoms that don't ease with rest or self-care.



Nightmares or frequent distressing dreams.



Panic symptoms, overwhelming anxiety or frequent shutdown.



Difficulty functioning at work, home or in relationships.

Feeling hopeless or like you can't cope.

Support early. You matter too. ♥

7 Important to remember

Your system may be reacting to what it has absorbed.

Caring deeply and being present with others can have an impact. Your reactions make sense. With awareness, support and intentional care, your nervous system can settle and you can continue to do meaningful work.

A healthier you helps create a healthier workplace. And that helps everyone. ♥

You are needed. Your wellbeing matters. ♥