

Mitigating Secondary Trauma Effects

Recognizing and Addressing Secondary Trauma Stress for Service Providers of Farmworkers, and Refugee, Immigrant, and Migrant Communities (RIM)

Introduction

Secondary trauma is commonly recognized as a professional risk among first responder and medical professionals including law enforcement, the military, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS).^{1,2} Studies show that people in other front-line professions such as community health workers (CHW), case managers, and others who work with refugee, immigrant, migrant (RIM) and farmworker communities are also at risk of secondary trauma and need practical ways to cope.³⁻⁵

Workplaces that serve RIM communities, such as community-based organizations providing direct services, can be emotionally demanding and are often overwhelmed by individuals experiencing symptoms of acute anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), panic attacks, and depression to traumatic events.^{4,6} Staff in these settings are often exposed to others' traumas, whether by witnessing distressing incidents, managing daily emotional challenges, or hearing about or seeing the people they serve and care about experience suffering and injustice.⁴ Many individuals who work extensively with RIM populations can feel an emotional toll of this work, as people in these helping professions often form close and caring relationships with the people they support and have reported experiencing symptoms such as emotional numbness, sleep difficulties, intrusive thoughts, irritability, and problems with concentration.⁴ Over time, this can lead to vicarious trauma, affecting employees' well-being, resilience, and job effectiveness. Recognizing and addressing secondary and vicarious trauma is essential to ensure that community workers can continue their work sustainably, with both compassion and emotional safety.



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1. WHAT IS SECONDARY TRAUMA & VICARIOUS TRAUMA?

Experiencing indirect trauma after being exposed to other people's trauma is often described by using several related terms. Vicarious trauma, secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout are frequently used interchangeably even though they do not mean the exact same thing. While their definitions overlap and individuals, groups, or organizations may experience several of them simultaneously, it's essential to distinguish among these concepts to effectively address them.⁷ This document will specifically focus on secondary trauma and vicarious trauma.



Secondary traumatic stress (STS)

Secondary traumatic stress (STS) occurs when individuals develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)-like symptoms after being indirectly exposed to someone else's traumatic event.⁷

Vicarious trauma

Vicarious trauma happens when someone is repeatedly exposed to other people's traumatic experiences.⁷

Secondary traumatic stress (STS)

- Development of PTSD-like symptoms
- Can occur unexpectedly and suddenly
- Do not have to directly witness or be involved in a traumatic event



Vicarious trauma

- Repeated exposure to other people's trauma
- Accumulates over time
- Potential to drastically alter an individual's character and belief systems

2. WHAT ARE COMMON BEHAVIORS AND SYMPTOMS OF SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS?⁴

People's reactions to indirect trauma happen automatically and unconsciously, however individuals may see and respond to the same event in different ways.⁴ Some symptoms to look out for among at-risk employees include:^{4,7}

- Headaches, heartburn, or rashes
- Emotional volatility - rapid or intense changes in emotions
- Irritability, grief, anxiety, and anger
- Social withdrawal- inclination to isolate from others
- Disrupted personal relationships
- Using substances to self-medicate or self-soothe
- Feelings of disconnection or [compassion fatigue](#), loss of purpose, or hope, etc.
- Burnout- prolonged state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion

Unrecognized and unaddressed secondary traumatic stress can lead to harmful impacts to community workers, their clients, and their organizations.⁴

3. HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS IMPLEMENT STRATEGIES TO REDUCE RISK?

It's important to recognize and treat symptoms early, as they can have lasting impacts to an employee's emotional well-being, worldview, and their ability to support or provide services to the community.

Organizational leaders can take proactive steps to prevent vicarious trauma among front-line staff by promoting well-being and balance in the workplace, such as:⁸⁻¹⁰

- Offering access to mental health resources, such as comprehensive insurance that covers confidential counseling.
- Consider partnerships with local gyms or health clubs to offer reduced membership rates for employees and their families.
- Consider implementing an organizational [secondary trauma](#) health assessment tool.
- Providing fair pay and paid time-off.
 - Enhance current sick leave policies by including language that supports Emotional Well-Being Days, encouraging employees to prioritize self-care without needing to use personal or vacation time and normalize their use.
- Ensuring adequate supervision: Be accessible and maintain open communication with team members, provide ongoing guidance and feedback.



3. HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS IMPLEMENT STRATEGIES TO REDUCE RISK? Continued

- Support employees in building strong community connections.¹¹
 - Host regular team workshops lunch-and-learns, or skill-sharing sessions.
 - Facilitate small peer support groups that encourage book clubs, bike clubs, or other similar interests.
 - Foster a culture of recognition and appreciation by highlighting staff contributions publicly, verbally, or via boards.
 - Offer opportunities for staff to participate in uplifting activities, such as outdoor gatherings or fun team events, that boost morale and encourage laughter.

Remember: laughter can improve immunity and release endorphins and creates a general feeling of happiness and can improve both mental and physical health.^{11,12}

Understanding how common secondary stress is among employees serving RIM and farmworker communities is a crucial initial step toward addressing the problem, both individually, for service providers, and collectively, within organizations. Taking action to reduce and prevent secondary stress helps sustain their important work and ensures that high-quality care is consistently delivered.⁴




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Appendix




The following English and Spanish template slides are provided for use in presentations to organizational staff. They are intended as a starting point and may be edited, customized, or adapted as needed to suit your organization's requirements and presentation goals. You must download the templates to edit before use.

- English: [Mitigating Secondary Trauma for Service Providers of Refugee, Immigrant, Migrant \(RIM\), and Farmworker communities](#)

 = This symbol indicates content that should be edited as needed before presentation.

Mitigating Secondary Trauma for Service Providers of Refugee, Immigrant, Migrant (RIM), and Farmworker communities

 [Presenter Name]
[Organization Name]
[Date]

 (Presentation slides for leadership & operational/frontline staff)  (Your logo here) 


Secondary & Vicarious Trauma in Direct Service Professions




Who Is at Risk?

- Common among first responders and medical professionals (law enforcement, military, EMS).
- Also impacts direct service staff such as community health workers, case managers, and those serving refugee, immigrant, migrant (RIM), and farmworker communities.


Why Are These Roles Are Vulnerable?

- Workplaces serving RIM communities face high emotional demands.
- Staff regularly encounter individuals experiencing acute anxiety, PTSD, panic attacks, and depression.







 (Presentation slides for leadership & operational/frontline staff)  (Your logo here) 

- Espanol: [Mitigación del trauma secundario para proveedores de servicios de comunidades de refugiados, inmigrantes, migrantes \(RIM\) y trabajadores agrícolas.](#)

 = Este símbolo indica que el contenido debe ser editado según sea necesario antes de su presentación.

Mitigación del trauma secundario para proveedores de servicios de comunidades de refugiados, inmigrantes, migrantes (RIM) y trabajadores agrícolas

 [Nombre del presentador]
[Nombre de la organización]
[Fecha]

 (Diapositivas de presentación para el personal de liderazgo y operativo/primer línea)  Su logotipo aquí 


Trauma secundario y vicario en profesiones de servicio directo




¿Quién está en riesgo?

- Común entre los primeros intervinientes y los profesionales médicos (fuerzas del orden, militares, servicios de emergencia).
- También afecta al personal de servicios directos, como trabajadores comunitarios de salud, gestores de casos y quienes atienden a comunidades de refugiados, inmigrantes, migrantes (RIM) y trabajadores agrícolas.

¿Por qué estos roles son vulnerables?

- Los lugares de trabajo que atienden a las comunidades RIM enfrentan demandas emocionales elevadas.
- El personal se encuentra regularmente con personas que sufren ansiedad aguda, TEPT, ataques de pánico y depresión.
- La exposición ocurre al presenciar eventos angustiosos, gestionar crisis emocionales en curso o escuchar sobre el sufrimiento y la injusticia.



 (Diapositivas de presentación para el personal de liderazgo y operativo/primer línea)  Su logotipo aquí 

Resources

Doing What Matters in Times of Stress

A resource designed to help people manage stress during difficult circumstances. It provides practical strategies that can be practiced in just a few minutes each day. The guide can be used on its own or paired with its accompanying audio exercises to support self-help and stress reduction.

Reducing Secondary Traumatic Stress

This book presents an approach to fostering emotional well-being in professionals who regularly face secondary trauma. The resource provides helping professionals with a set of skills that promote emotional regulation, aid in recovering from exposure to others' trauma, and enrich the overall quality of their supportive interactions.

Secondary Traumatic Stress Consortium

A comprehensive collection of helpful resources developed by the STS Consortium—including presentations, articles, assessments, tools, and recommended books—designed to support individuals and organizations in addressing Secondary Traumatic Stress and applying effective guiding principles.

The Body Keeps the Score

The Body Keeps the Score is a book by Dr. Bessel van der Kolk that explains how trauma reshapes the brain and body, leading to symptoms that persist long after the event.

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