

The Impact of Secondary Trauma on Educators

Karen Baicker

A 4th grade teacher named Sarah from New Orleans recently spoke about the trauma her students and families are facing, and the ways it frequently spills into her classroom. "This year already, I've had a student whose parent was killed, and others whose parents are in and out of jail. I've had to confiscate a weapon. Some of my kids are homeless." She does her best to help her students, including greeting them at the door with hugs and helping them get counseling. But at the end of the day, as she tries to fall asleep, she finds herself worrying about the difficulties her kids may be facing at that very moment.

Today, over half of all children in the United States suffer from some kind of trauma. Whether trauma stems from a student's home life or results from a community tragedy, teachers recognize that helping children cope with outside challenges is part and parcel with helping them learn. However, far less known—and even less supported—is the impact that student trauma has on educators like Sarah.

What Is Secondary Traumatic Stress?

Secondary traumatic stress (STS) is the emotional distress that arises when someone vicariously experiences the traumatic experiences of another individual. Sometimes known as compassion fatigue, the toll of tending to someone's painful experiences can create very real symptoms in caregivers, including teachers.

Other fields, including nursing and law enforcement, have long identified the toll that interacting with victims of trauma can take on caring professionals. In these sectors, awareness of the impact has led to systems for recognizing, processing, and treating the professionals impacted by STS. However, despite schools making great strides implementing a trauma-informed approach to caring for students, the emotional distress that educators experience when working with traumatized students is still widely overlooked.

What Are the Symptoms of STS?

One reason STS goes unrecognized is that it can mirror the emotional burnout many teachers experience. Teachers who find themselves drained from their days in class may chalk it up to the rigors of lesson-planning, standardized tests, behavioral challenges, and other quotidian demands of the classroom.

Some of the common symptoms of STS include

- Increased anxiety and concern about safety
- Intrusive negative thoughts and images related to students' traumatic stories
- Fatigue and physical complaints
- Feelings of numbness or detachment from students and peers
- Diminished concentration and difficulty with decision making
- Desire to physically or emotionally withdraw from others
- Feelings of professional inadequacy

Who Is Most At Risk?

Knowing that you are helping others can provide an emotional lift. Compassion satisfaction is the condition of feeling rewarded or motivated by helping those experiencing trauma. Teachers who are drawn to the field of education tend to be empathetic to begin with, and thus are predisposed to compassion satisfaction. Yet being prone to compassion satisfaction is itself a risk factor for STS.

Teachers who work in areas of high poverty or high trauma will typically experience a greater exposure to STS, but trauma exists across all socioeconomic groups. According to the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(NCTSN\)](#), risk appears to be greater among

Educators with previous or unresolved trauma exposure

Female educators

Highly empathetic educators

New or inexperienced educators, with a lack of training

Educators working with unsupportive administrations

Educators working in communities that have experienced communal trauma, including high levels of poverty, high levels of crime, generational/historical trauma, tragic events, and natural disasters

How Can STS Be Treated?

Steve Hydon is a clinical professor at the University of Southern California and a leading researcher bringing knowledge from the field of social work into education. Hydon suggests the first step in treating STS is to build understanding and awareness of STS.

Hydon worked with the U.S. Department of Education to develop psychological first aid resources for educators rebuilding in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Administrators looking to implement a district- or school-wide approach to STS can look to this five-step program:

1. **Listen:** Create a safe space for teachers to share their stories with one another.
2. **Protect:** Preserve that teacher's confidentiality and work to keep them safe from their stressors.
3. **Connect:** Connect with the teacher's experience and use that to help provide them with resources for stress management.
4. **Model:** Develop systems and plans for stress management.
5. **Teach:** Using these steps, help one another in your teacher capacities, continue to learn more about STS, and share your experiences.

A number of other approaches have been found to provide support: regularly scheduled meetings where educators can come together to discuss workplace stress and partake in counseling services; STS training programs; faculty appreciation events; and other stress-relieving social activities.

Experts also recommend that teachers manage the effects of STS in their personal lives by engaging with family and friends, reconnecting with hobbies, practicing mindfulness techniques, and prioritizing self-care. It is also crucial to establish personal, professional, and emotional boundaries between work and home.

Trauma and the Power of Story

Many educators also advocate for the healing power of stories in coping with both primary and secondary trauma. The [Yale Child Study Center – Scholastic Collaborative for Child & Family Resilience](#) is currently researching ways that literacy, and the ability to craft and reshape one's personal narrative, can provide a buffer for children facing adversity and build resilience for teachers. Through literature, people can learn that others have experienced and coped with similar adversity.

In the latest Scholastic [Kids & Family Reading Report](#), over half of the students surveyed said they have turned to books to help them through difficult times.

Trauma experts caution that asking victims to retell a traumatic incident, especially in the near aftermath, has the risk of retraumatizing the victim. However, when implemented thoughtfully, storytelling allows the narrator not just the power to retell, but to rewrite their experiences. Working together through traumatic circumstances offers students and teachers alike the chance to reclaim and reframe those events in ways that offer hope and healing.

To learn more about support for STS, please visit [the National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) or the [crisis hotlines](#).

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