

# SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS PACKET

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Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (DV/SA) providers are at risk of being indirectly traumatized as a result of hearing about survivors' experiences and witnessing the negative effects. In the first section of this packet, learn about secondary traumatic stress and related conditions; in the second section, use the tools and strategies provided to help you create individual and agency-wide plans to promote staff self-care and resilience.

## Secondary Traumatic Stress and Related Conditions

**Secondary traumatic stress (STS)** is the emotional distress that results when an individual hears about the traumatic experiences of another individual. Distress may result from hearing survivors' trauma stories, seeing high levels of distress in the aftermath of a traumatic event, needing to retell a survivor's story, and/or seeing photos or images related to the trauma. Common symptoms of STS include the following:

- Increased anxiety and concern about safety
- Intrusive, negative thoughts and images related to survivors' traumatic stories
- Fatigue and physical complaints
- Feeling numb or detached
- Feeling powerless or hopeless about the work
- Diminished concentration and difficulty with decision making
- Desire to physically or emotionally withdraw from people or situations that trigger difficult thoughts and emotions

Several other terms capture elements of STS, but with some differences.

**Burnout** is characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a sense of reduced personal accomplishment. Although burnout also is work related, burnout develops as a result of general occupational stress; the term is not used specifically to describe the effects of indirect trauma exposure.

**Compassion fatigue** is a less stigmatizing way to describe STS and is sometimes used interchangeably with the term STS.

**Vicarious trauma** refers to internal changes in providers who engage empathetically with children and adults affected by trauma. It is a theoretical term that describes the cumulative effects of secondary exposure to trauma.

**Compassion satisfaction** describes the positive feelings derived from competent performance as a professional working with trauma survivors. It is characterized by positive

relationships with colleagues and the conviction that one's efforts contribute in a meaningful way to survivors, their families, and the community.

## Risk Factors for STS and Related Conditions

Any professional who works directly with people exposed to trauma and hears them recount their traumatic experiences is at risk of STS. Additional risk factors associated with STS and related conditions for professionals include:

- Prior trauma exposure
- Female gender
- Inexperience in the field
- Current dose of exposure to others' traumatic experiences
- Type of work
- Young age
- Level of support
- Personality and coping style
- Spiritual resources
- Work style
- Work environment (e.g., lack of support, unrealistic expectations, large caseloads, isolation, lack of training, survivor distress)
- Societal attitudes and/or judgements about the work
- Issues of structural violence, oppression, and discrimination

## Warning Signs of STS and Vicarious Trauma

Professionals affected by secondary traumatic stress and related conditions such as vicarious trauma experience a variety of symptoms that may affect all aspects of daily life, including negative changes in beliefs about themselves, others, and their work.

Warning Signs of STS and Vicarious Trauma	
<b>Hypervigilance</b>	Excessive alertness for potential threats or dangers at and outside of work. Always being “on” and “on the lookout”
<b>Poor Boundaries</b>	Lacking a balanced sense of your role so that you take on too much, step in and try to control events, have difficulty leaving work at work, or take the work too personally
<b>Avoidance</b>	Coping with stress by shutting down and disconnecting
<b>Inability to Empathize/Numbing</b>	Unable to remain emotionally connected to the work
<b>Addictions</b>	Attaching to distractions to check out from work, personal life, or both
<b>Chronic Exhaustion/ Physical Ailments</b>	Experiencing physical, emotional, and spiritual fatigue or inexplicable aches and pains exceeding what you expect for an ordinary busy day or week
<b>Minimizing</b>	Trivializing a current experience by comparing it with another situation that we regard as more severe
<b>Anger and Cynicism</b>	Using cynicism or anger to cope other intense feelings that we may not understand or know how to manage
<b>Feelings of Professional Inadequacy</b>	Becoming increasingly unsure of yourself professionally, second-guessing yourself, feeling insecure about tasks that you once felt confident to perform

## Tools for Staff Self-Care and Resilience

A number of individual and system-level strategies effectively promote staff self-care and resilience. This section includes the following tools for supporting individual and agency-wide strategies for addressing and minimizing the effects of STS and related conditions:

- **Shared Strategies for Staff Self-Care and Resilience** suggests individual and agency-wide strategies to support a culture of staff wellness.
- **Staff Self-Care Plan** begins with a personal inventory of warning signs, proceeds to an assessment of self-care practices, and concludes with making a commitment to specific practices.
- **Agency Self-Care Plan** offers a process similar to developing an individual self-care plan but for the entire agency.

### Shared Strategies for Staff Self-Care and Resilience

Creating a healthy work environment is a shared process that includes individual and agency-based strategies. Explore these ideas for what you can do and what your agency can do to foster wellness for all.

What You Can Do	What Your Agency Can Do
<p>Increase your knowledge and awareness of the effects of trauma and STS.</p> <p>Assess your current level of burnout, STS, and vicarious trauma.</p>	<p>Educate staff about the effects of trauma, STS, and related conditions and provide regular opportunities for staff to address potential issues related to STS.</p> <p>Identify and monitor STS among staff and organizationally. Here are three tools that may be helpful:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>■ Compassion fatigue self-test <a href="http://www.ptsdsupport.net/compassion_fatigue-selftest.html">http://www.ptsdsupport.net/compassion_fatigue-selftest.html</a></li><li>■ Professional quality of life scale, ProQOL 5 <a href="http://proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html">http://proqol.org/ProQol_Test.html</a></li><li>■ Secondary Traumatic Stress-Informed Organization Assessment <a href="https://fieldcenteratpenn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/WorkshopD6Handout_STSIOA.pdf">https://fieldcenteratpenn.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/WorkshopD6Handout_STSIOA.pdf</a></li></ul>
<p>Stay connected to other people and groups that are supportive and nourishing.</p> <p>Identify and incorporate specific self-care strategies for promoting resilience and maintaining a healthy work–life balance (e.g., exercise, good nutrition, supportive networks).</p>	<p>Encourage and develop formal strategies for peer support and mentorship.</p> <p>Create a culture that fosters staff resilience that includes: fair leave policies, adequate benefits, a physically safe and secure working environment, sufficient supervision, support and resources to do the work, and processes for shared decision making.</p>

## Staff Self-Care Plan

Use this worksheet to create your own self-care plan. You do not need to share your answers with anyone—this is simply for self-reflection. Check back regularly to see how things are going and assess whether you need to make any adjustments to your plan.

### 1. Recognize the warning signs.

Becoming aware of the effects your work has on you is essential to helping you take care of yourself. Think about the warning signs of STS and related conditions and consider how they may be present in your daily life. Feel free to add other signs that you are feeling overworked, overextended, or overwhelmed.

Warning Sign	Yes or No	If Yes, Describe the Effect on You
Increased anxiety or concern about safety	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Intrusive, negative thoughts and images related to survivors' traumatic experiences	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Difficulty maintaining work–life boundaries	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Avoiding people, places, and activities that you used to find enjoyable	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	

Warning Sign	Yes or No	If Yes, Describe the Effect on You
Feeling emotionally numb, disconnected, or unable to empathize	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Experiencing feelings of chronic exhaustion and related physical ailments	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Regularly feeling angry and/or cynical about your work	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Feeling inadequate in your work and questioning whether what you do matters	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No	
Other:		

## 2. Assess your self-care practice.

Many strategies are available to support self-care and reduce the signs and symptoms of STS and related conditions. Take some time to complete the self-care self-assessment below. This tool provides ideas about how to practice self-care across many areas of your life. Remember that no one strategy works for everyone.

**How often do you do the following? (Rate, using the following scale):**

**5—Frequently 4—Sometimes 3—Rarely 2—Never 1—It never even occurred to me**

### Physical self-care

<input type="checkbox"/>	Eat regularly (e.g., breakfast and lunch)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Eat healthfully
<input type="checkbox"/>	Exercise or go to the gym
<input type="checkbox"/>	Lift weights
<input type="checkbox"/>	Practice martial arts

<input type="checkbox"/>	Get regular medical care for prevention
<input type="checkbox"/>	Get medical care when needed
<input type="checkbox"/>	Take time off when you are sick
<input type="checkbox"/>	Get massages or other body work

	Do physical activity that is fun for you
	Take time to be sexual
	Get enough sleep
	Wear clothes you like
	Take vacations
	Take day trips or mini-vacations
	Get away from stressful technology, such as pagers, faxes, telephones, and e-mail
	Other:

### Psychological self-care

	Make time for self-reflection
	Go to see a psychotherapist or counselor for yourself
	Write in a journal
	Read literature unrelated to work
	Do something at which you are a beginner
	Take a step to decrease stress in your life
	Notice your inner experience—your dreams, thoughts, imagery, and feelings
	Let others know different aspects of you
	Engage your intelligence in a new area—go to an art museum, performance, sports event, exhibit, or other cultural event
	Practice receiving from others
	Be curious
	Say no sometimes to extra responsibilities
	Spend time outdoors
	Other:

### Emotional self-care

	Spend time with others whose company you enjoy
	Stay in contact with important people in your life
	Treat yourself kindly (supportive inner dialogue or self-talk)

	Feel proud of yourself
	Reread favorite books, review favorite movies
	Identify and seek out comforting activities, objects, people, relationships, places
	Allow yourself to cry
	Find things that make you laugh
	Express your outrage in a constructive way
	Play with children
	Other:

### Spiritual self-care

	Make time for prayer, meditation, and reflection
	Spend time in nature
	Participate in a spiritual gathering, community, or group
	Be open to inspiration
	Cherish your optimism and hope
	Be aware of nontangible (nonmaterial) aspects of life
	Be open to mystery, to not knowing
	Identify what is meaningful to you and notice its place in your life
	Sing
	Express gratitude
	Celebrate milestones with rituals that are meaningful to you
	Remember and memorialize loved ones who have died
	Nurture others
	Have awe-filled experiences
	Contribute to or participate in causes you believe in
	Read inspirational literature
	Listen to inspiring music
	Other:

### Workplace or professional self-care

	Take time to eat lunch
	Take time to chat with coworkers
	Make time to complete tasks
	Identify projects or tasks that are exciting, growth promoting, and rewarding for you

	Pursue regular learning and professional development
	Get support from colleagues
	Negotiate for your needs
	Have a peer support group
	Other:

### Follow-up questions to consider

1. What was this process of filling out the checklist like for you?

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2. Were you surprised by any of your responses? If so, which ones?

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3. In what areas are you strongest? Weakest?

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### 3. Adopt specific strategies.

Based on your responses to the self-care self-assessment, list 1–2 things in each area that you already do and 1–2 things that you would like to do to take care of yourself. Then choose 3–5 things from your list that you can make a commitment to doing in the next month.

Area	Already Do	Would Like to Do
Physical		
Relational		
Emotional		
Spiritual		
Professional		

Committed to doing:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

# Agency Self-Care Plan

These checklists will help you recognize warning signs of STS at an agency level and to choose agency-wide strategies to support self-care.

## 1. Recognize the warning signs.

A range of warning signs can indicate that your agency as a whole may be affected by trauma. Check any signs you detect in your agency.

	Work environment is often chaotic, disorganized, and unpredictable.
	Staff members are often fearful of their own safety.
	Staff members often use harsh and punitive approaches to maintain control.
	The agency has a high rate of staff turnover.
	The agency has a high rate of staff absenteeism.
	There is a lack of communication and/or frequent miscommunication among staff members.
	Interpersonal conflicts are increasing among staff members in different roles or departments.
	Work is often incomplete.
	Work quality is often poor.
	The agency has a negative atmosphere.
	People at the agency feel a lack of emotional support.
	Staff members have less energy or motivation to go the extra mile.
	Staff members collectively tend to be cynical and negative about the people they serve.
	Survivor complaints about the agency have increased.

## 2. Assess your agency-wide self-care practices.

Check everything that your agency currently does to support staff members in each domain.

### Training and education

	The agency provides education to all employees on the signs of STS and related conditions such as vicarious trauma.
	The agency provides all employees with professional development related to stress management, self-care, and resilience-focused strategies.

	The agency provides all employees with training related to their job tasks.
	Staff members are given opportunities to attend refresher trainings and trainings on new topics related to their roles.
	Staff coverage is in place to support training.
	The agency provides education on steps necessary to advance employees in their roles.

### **Support and supervision**

	The agency offers an employee assistance program.
	Employee job descriptions and responsibilities are clearly defined.
	All staff members have access to regular supervision or support by administrators or peers.
	Staff members have access to ongoing support for managing workload and time needed to complete tasks.
	Staff members are encouraged to understand their own stress reactions and take appropriate steps to develop their own self-care plans.
	Staff members are regularly supported in practicing self-care strategies.
	Staff members are welcome to discuss concerns about the agency or their jobs with administrators without negative consequences (e.g., being treated differently, feeling like their jobs are in jeopardy, or having their concerns affect their positions on the team).
	Staff members are encouraged to take breaks, including lunch and vacation time.
	The agency fosters team-based support and mentoring for staff.
	The agency has a formal process for debriefing with staff after crises.

### **Employee control and input**

	The agency provides opportunities for staff members to give input into practices and policies.
	The agency reviews its policies on a regular basis to identify whether the policies are helpful or harmful to the health and well-being of its employees.
	The agency provides opportunities for staff members to identify their professional goals.
	Staff members have formal channels for addressing problems and grievances.

	Workplace issues, including grievance issues and interpersonal difficulties, are managed by individuals in the appropriate roles and are confidential.
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### Communication

	Staff members attend regularly scheduled team meetings.
	Topics related to self-care and stress management are addressed in team meetings.
	Regular discussions of how people and departments are communicating and relaying information occur in team meetings.
	The agency has a way of assessing staff level of STS and related conditions.
	The agency has a way of evaluating staff satisfaction on a regular basis.

### Work environment

	The work environment is well lit.
	The work environment is physically well maintained (e.g., clean, secure).
	Information about self-care is posted in places that are visible.
	Employee rights are posted in places that are visible.
	The agency provides opportunities for community building among employees.
	The agency has policies concerning acts of discrimination, harassment, disrespect, and bullying for staff.
	The agency responds promptly to any acts of discrimination, harassment, disrespect, and bullying among staff.

## 3. Adopt specific strategies that promote staff self-care and resilience.

Based on your responses on the agency self-care assessment, list 1–2 things in each area that your agency already does to support staff and 1–2 things that you would like to see more of to promote staff wellness.

If you are in a leadership position, you may consider gathering staff opinions related to the agency's current support for self-care and use the feedback to identify gaps and related action steps. If you are not in a position to implement some of these strategies, take this agency self-care plan to your supervisors or directors for their consideration.

Area	Already Do	Would Like to Do
Training and Education		
Support and Supervision		
Employee Control and Input		
Communication		
Work Environment		

## References

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