

lifelines

information for your life

WINTER ISSUE

2025



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SECONDARY TRAUMA: WHEN YOU'RE AFFECTED BY ANOTHER PERSON'S TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

It's possible to have stress reactions to a traumatic event without experiencing the event yourself. Known as *secondary* or *vicarious trauma*, this can happen when you provide help and assistance to trauma survivors, listen to the stories of people who have experienced trauma, or view disturbing images of traumatic events.

What is secondary trauma?

Secondary trauma, also known as *vicarious trauma* or *secondary traumatic stress*, is the indirect trauma a person can experience when exposed to images or stories of other people's traumatic experiences. In secondary or vicarious trauma, a person doesn't directly experience the traumatic event but has a stress reaction from indirect or second-hand exposure.

You might experience secondary trauma as a result of

- Working with victims of violence
- Providing aid and assistance to survivors of a natural disaster
- Helping a friend or family member cope with the effects of trauma
- Viewing crime scene evidence or listening to courtroom testimony
- Watching graphic news reports on television
- Listening to disturbing stories on the radio

The stress reactions experienced in secondary trauma can be as intense and debilitating as those that occur after the direct experience of trauma.

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SECONDARY TRAUMA: WHEN YOU'RE AFFECTED BY ANOTHER PERSON'S TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

Continued

Who might be affected by secondary trauma?

People in the helping professions—such as social work, medical care, mental health counseling, teaching, emergency response, and disaster relief—may be at risk for secondary trauma, as their work can expose them to the stories and effects of traumatic experiences. But they are not the only ones. Lawyers, insurance claim workers, journalists, and news editors can be exposed to disturbing stories and images in their work that can trigger traumatic stress reactions.

Friends, partners, and family members of trauma victims can also be at risk for secondary trauma as they try to help a loved one recover from trauma by listening to their stories and providing empathic support. Children of trauma victims can be affected, too, as they grow up listening to stories of a parent's traumatic experiences.

In times of widespread disruption and disaster, as in wartime, people who provide volunteer assistance or take those needing help into their homes may also be exposed to troubling stories that can result in secondary trauma.

Signs of Secondary Trauma

The signs of secondary trauma are similar to those seen in people who have experienced trauma directly. These may include

- Physical symptoms, such as
 - Exhaustion
 - Headaches
 - Trouble sleeping (insomnia)
 - Loss of appetite
 - Recurring illness (reduced immune response)
- Behavioral symptoms, such as
 - Increased alcohol or substance use
 - Stress eating
 - Anger or irritability
 - Overwork, absenteeism, or avoidance of certain work or clients
 - Problems in personal relationships
- Psychological symptoms, such as
 - Recurring thoughts of the other person's traumatic experience
 - Loss of a sense of safety
 - Irrational fears
 - Excessive wariness and attention to risk (hypervigilance)
 - Reduced ability to feel empathy
 - Loss of a sense of control or an increased need to control events or other people
 - Loss of pleasure in daily activities

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SECONDARY TRAUMA: WHEN YOU'RE AFFECTED BY ANOTHER PERSON'S TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE

Continued

Ways to Cope with Secondary Trauma

Pay attention to the signs of traumatic stress.

When you notice the stress effects of secondary trauma, take steps to calm yourself and redirect your thoughts.

Take care of yourself.

- Engage in regular physical activity—walking, running, dance, yoga, or another activity you enjoy.
- Get the sleep and rest you need.
- Calm yourself with mindfulness, meditation, deep breathing, spending time in nature, or another method that works for you.

Connect with others.

Talk about your feelings with people you trust—your partner, close friends or colleagues, or family members.

Engage in a creative activity.

Write, paint, make music, cook, or engage in another creative activity that absorbs your full attention.

Reflect on the value of your work and the support you are providing.

Remind yourself of the value of the help you are providing to other people, and allow yourself to

feel pride in your work and the actions that you're taking.

When to Seek Help

Seek professional help when your efforts at self-calming and the support of friends, family, and colleagues aren't enough to manage your traumatic stress reactions. Evidence-based treatments such as cognitive behavioral therapy and cognitive processing therapy can help control secondary traumatic stress reactions. Medications used to treat depression and anxiety may also help. Your primary care doctor or your employee support program can help you find a professional therapist with experience in treating stress reactions related to trauma.

For More Information

Lipsky, L., & Burk, C. (2009). *Trauma stewardship: An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others*. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Mathieu, F. (2012). *The compassion fatigue workbook: Creative tools for transforming compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatization*. New York: Routledge.

Social Work License Map. (2020, April 7). *Resource guide for coping with secondhand trauma*. Retrieved June 23, 2022,

from <https://socialworklicensemap.com/blog/coping-with-secondary-trauma>



ACTIVE LISTENING WITH YOUR CHILD

Active listening is a good way to improve your communication with your child. It lets your child know you are interested in what they have to say.

Follow these tips to practice active listening:

- Give your full attention to your child.
- Make eye contact and stop other things you are doing.
- Get down on your child's level.
- Reflect or repeat back what they are saying and what they may be feeling to make sure you understand.

It can be tempting to brush off your children's problems, especially if you have had a bad day or if you are busy. But your children need to know that you are going to listen to them. This will make it more likely that your children will talk with you

about their hopes and problems when they are older. Here is an example.

Active Listening Example 1

Your child's baseball game is at 6:00 p.m. You only have a short time to make dinner, help with homework, and get everyone ready for the game. While the kids play, you quickly start making dinner. Soon, you hear your son crying. He comes and tells you that his brother hit him and called him a bad name.

You are tempted to keep making dinner while nodding your head at what your child is saying, but then you decide to show him you are actively listening.

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ACTIVE LISTENING WITH YOUR CHILD

Continued

You stop what you are doing, turn to him, make eye contact, and summarize what he has told you and how he seems to be feeling. You say, "It sounds like your brother made you feel sad when he hit you and said mean things." By doing this, you have let your child know that he has your full attention. He knows that his emotions and feelings are important to you.

Sometimes a child who is upset may not be able to name the emotion they are feeling. Active listening can be a great way to help them. Here is an example.

Active Listening Example 2

You pick up your daughter from preschool. She is crying and tells you that her friend took her favorite toy and stuck out his tongue at her. You show her that you are actively listening when you say, "It seems like you are sad about your friend taking your favorite toy." Your daughter continues to cry and nods her head. She says that she thinks her friend will break the toy. You show her that you are still actively listening by saying, "So you are scared that your friend might break your toy." At this time, your daughter calms down a bit. You and your daughter continue to talk, and she knows that it is okay to be upset. She has begun to learn how to label and cope with her feelings by talking to someone

Using Reflections to Show You're Listening

Reflection is one way for you to show you are actively listening to your child. You can do this by repeating back what your child has said or by labeling and summing up how you think they feel.

Reflections of Words

When you reflect your child's words, you are giving attention to them for their use of words. This increases the chance that your child will talk more because they want your attention. You don't have



to repeat exactly what your child said, but what you say is usually very similar. You can add detail, shorten, or correct what your child has said. Here is an example:

Reflection Example

Child: "I drew some sghetti."

Parent Response: "You drew some long spaghetti."

In this example, the parent corrects the grammar, pronounces "spaghetti" for the child, and adds detail by describing the spaghetti as "long."

Reflection of Emotions

When you reflect your child's emotions, you watch your child's behavior and describe the emotions they seem to be having. This gives your child a word for the emotion and helps them learn that it is ok to talk about feelings. Reflection of emotions is not always easy. Here are some tips to make it easier:

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ACTIVE LISTENING WITH YOUR CHILD

Continued

- **Take a guess even if you are unsure.** There may be times when you are unsure what your child is feeling. For example, your child may be crying but you may not know if they are angry, scared, or sad. Let them know that you are paying attention by saying, "It seems like you are upset," or "It sounds/looks like something is bothering you." Your child may not know what they are feeling; by talking, you can figure it out together.
- **Words aren't needed all the time.** You can let your child know you are paying attention to how they feel by what you do even if you don't say anything. You can just sit with your child while they are upset or stay physically close and hold or comfort them.
- **You don't always have to agree.** Sometimes it is difficult to summarize or label your child's feelings because you think they should be responding in a different way. Telling your child to stop feeling a particular way does not show your child you are trying to understand how they feel. Help them deal with and understand their feelings by talking with your child about their feelings.
- **Talk about other feelings.** Children may have several emotions at the same time. For example, your child might feel sad and afraid at the same time. Show your child you care about what they are showing on the outside and may be feeling on the inside by talking about all the feelings.
- **Don't worry about getting it wrong.** Sometimes when parents are learning active listening skills, they worry that they will incorrectly summarize and label their child's feelings. You should not worry. Children



usually correct their parents if their feelings are described incorrectly. If your child corrects you, try again. Reflect what they have said to you, and expand on it to give them more words and to learn ways to describe his feelings.



AFFIRMATIONS FOR PARENTS

An affirmation is a simple statement that you tell yourself. It might be related to things you want to accomplish, how you wish to behave, or positive attitudes that you desire to cultivate. Your child needs to know that you love them, and one way you can show love is through affirmations.

There are a couple of important rules you should consider when using affirmations:

You must believe what you are saying is true.

You must be consistent, persistent, and reinforcing.

Affirmations are most effective if done every single day.

What follows are statements of affirmation that you might use. Select at least five, or make up some of your own, that you could use daily. Repeat them over and over to yourself, at least 10 times a day:

- I am consistent in the way I parent my child.
- I respect the opinions of my child.
- I support the positive traits of my child and downplay the negative ones.
- I demonstrate my support of my child's interests by attending related functions whenever possible.
- I have established rules and consequences for my child.
- I use praise instead of criticism or sarcasm with my child.

- I encourage my child to practice making positive self-statements.
- I let my child know that they are an important person in our family.
- I make time to communicate regularly with my child.
- I understand my child's need to develop a sense of personal identity.
- I talk to my child about how to handle peer pressure.
- I respect my child's need for independence and privacy.
- I allow my child to make decisions and discuss the results with them at a later time.
- I regularly laugh with my child.
- I am available for my child when they need me.
- I encourage my child to develop relationships with other adults who are positive role models.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Workplace Options. (Revised 2023). *Affirmations for parents*. Raleigh, NC: Author.



FRIENDSHIPS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Friendships can be fantastic, but they also can be tough at times. The main thing to remember is that good friends support you, respect you, and like you for who you really are!

What are true friends?

True friends

- Want you to be happy
- Care what you have to say
- Encourage and support you
- Accept you for who you are
- Are happy for you when you do well
- Apologize when they make a mistake
- Give you advice in a caring way
- Keep personal things between the two of you

- Don't pressure you to do things that make you feel uncomfortable

How can I handle peer pressure?

Peer pressure is when you do something because friends talk you into it or because you think everyone else is doing it. It can be hard to resist peer pressure. Try to remember that real friends stand by you even if you say "No."

When it's time to stand up for what you believe, be assertive. That means you calmly and politely say what you want (or don't want). You don't need to criticize what the other person is doing. Just keep it simple, like "No, thanks." If you're having trouble handling peer pressure, talk to your parents or a trusted adult. Not sure how to start? You could ask them if they ever had to handle peer pressure when they were young.

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FRIENDSHIPS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Continued

If you're having trouble handling peer pressure, talk to your parents or a trusted adult. Not sure how to start? You could ask them if they ever had to handle peer pressure when they were young.

How can I cope with cliques?

It's natural to have a group of friends who share things in common, but a *clique* is a group of friends that is very picky—and even mean—about who can join it. If you are being left out by a clique, try to make friends with people who care about you. It feels good to be liked for who you really are!

How can I handle a fight with a friend?

You won't always agree with friends. That's natural. However, you should always respect each other's thoughts and feelings.

Sometimes, a conflict can really hurt or last a long time. How can you cope? Think about whether your friendship is healthy and worth trying to save. If so, you can try some of these give-and-take ideas and tips for dealing with conflict:

- **Be assertive.** Ask for what you want respectfully.

- **Don't be aggressive.** You don't try to get what you want by threatening or hurting the other person.
- **Try to negotiate.** This means both people trade ideas about what to do or how to handle an issue.
- **You can compromise.** That means each of you gives up a bit of what you want to come to an agreement on an issue.

When should I end a friendship?

Sadly, not all friendships last a lifetime. Sometimes friends just grow apart naturally. Sometimes you might need to end a friendship. Signs you should end a friendship include that the person

- Is mean to you or treats you badly
- Tells your secrets
- Often goes after someone you are dating or like
- Does not want you to have other friends
- Does not listen to

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FRIENDSHIPS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Continued

- Pushes you to do dangerous things
- Blames you for problems in his or her life
- Often tries to control what you do

How do you end a relationship? Sometimes, you can just stop being in touch with your friend. That's a good idea if the person has been emotionally or physically abusive. Other times, a direct talk with the other person is better. That way, your friend won't be confused about what's happening. Also, if you point out the problem, you give the person a chance to change.

Office on Women's Health (OWH), GirlsHealth. (Updated 2015, November 2). *Friendships*. Retrieved June 10, 2021, from <https://www.girlshealth.gov>