

BTAC

BULLETIN

BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE | LAW ENFORCEMENT & COUNTERINTELLIGENCE | CYBERSECURITY | EMPLOYEE MANAGEMENT RELATIONS | THREAT ASSESSMENT & MANAGEMENT



SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

Trauma impacts the workforce in complex ways that are not always fully recognized, and the unique stressors experienced by those in military, law enforcement, insider threat, intelligence community analysts, and other similar professions, increase risk of secondary traumatic exposure. Secondary trauma (also called indirect or vicarious trauma) can happen when we learn about traumatic events, are exposed to graphic or disturbing materials, or work closely with individuals who have experienced trauma. Research has identified that secondary trauma can negatively impact mental health, degrade the workforce, and may increase insider risk as those impacted can become increasingly distressed and react in ways that may harm others, themselves, and their organization. Although secondary traumatic stress can lead to mental health symptoms, professional burnout, moral injury, and even posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), scientific research has also identified possible positive outcomes to include vicarious resilience, posttraumatic growth, and compassion satisfaction, a sense of fulfillment that comes from helping others.¹ Organizations that effectively mitigate risks to their workforce from secondary traumatic exposure can increase the likelihood of positive outcomes and thereby reduce maladaptive responses and the potential for damaging insider acts.

Possible Responses to Work-Related Trauma Exposure

Negative

- Secondary Traumatic Stress
- Compassion Fatigue
- Moral Injury

Neutral

- Effective Coping
- Maintain Work-Life Harmony

Positive

- Vicarious Resilience
- Post-Traumatic Growth
- Compassion Satisfaction

Mitigate the Effects of Secondary Traumatic Stress⁶:

Individual Strategies

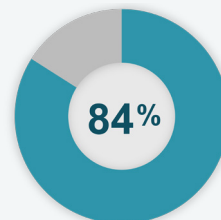
- **Seek Work-Life Harmony:** Professional and personal activities can mutually enrich one another to enhance overall health and well-being. Instead of viewing work as competing with other obligations on a seesaw that needs "balance," identify opportunities to harmonize work and personal activities to prioritize and pursue what really matters to you in life.
- **Transform Stressful Experiences:** When stressful, disturbing, or traumatic experiences occur, resist the impulse to avoid others or isolate yourself. Instead, seek social connection to process experiences with safe colleagues, friends, family, or other loved ones.
- **Utilize Available Resources:** Leverage Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), mental health services, support groups, and/or spiritual support from Chaplains or local religious organizations.

Organizational Strategies

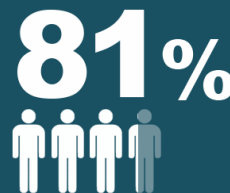
- **Caseload Management:** Ensure projects or cases with potentially disturbing content are identified and tracked. Leaders should check in to monitor subordinates' reactions to disturbing content and provide any needed support or resources.
- **Psychoeducation:** Train the workforce in the potential impacts of exposure to disturbing materials, effective coping strategies, and available resources. Ensure awareness of realistic expectations and resources for an individual who has a negative reaction to material.
- **Peer Support Programs:** Identify individuals who can provide support to peers who experience negative reactions and provide training in Mental Health First Aid or similar skills to aid in recognizing and responding to signs and symptoms of secondary traumatic stress.

Stress is the part of the job that is hard, trauma is the part of the job that hurts, and moral injury is the part of the job that changes you.²

Dr. Cherylynn Lee



Respondents said workplace conditions contributed to at least one mental health challenge³



workers will seek employers that support mental health⁴



InT professionals report significantly higher stress than the general population⁵

Know the Signs: Secondary Traumatic Stress

- **Avoidance & Isolation:** Withdrawing from friends/family and avoiding typical activities
- **Emotional Numbing:** Feeling emotionally shut down and/or unable to experience pleasure
- **Hypervigilance:** Increased monitoring of surroundings or excessive worry about danger
- **Re-experiencing:** Intrusive thoughts or nightmares related to disturbing content

1. Sudkamp, K.M., Williams, H.J., Jaycox, L.H., Dunigan, M., & Young, S. (2022). *Trauma in the U.S. intelligence community: Risks and responses*. RAND Corporation. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA1027-1.html> 2. Lee, C. (2024, December 27). The part of the job that changes you. *American Police Beat Magazine*. <https://apwebcom/2024/12/the-part-of-the-job-that-changes-you/> 3. Mind Share Partners. (2021). *Mental health at work 2021 report*. <https://www.mindsharepartners.org/mentalhealthatworkreport-2021> 4. American Psychological Association. (2022). *Work and well-being survey*. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-well-being> 5. Matthews, G., Braden, L., Atkinson, P. & Kennedy, K. (in press). Stress and threat assessment professionals: Survey results and strategies for enhancing work-life harmony. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*. 6. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Victims of Crime. (2017). *Vicarious trauma toolkit*. <https://vtt.ovc.ojp.gov/tools-for-victim-services>