

## Vicarious Trauma | Secondary Trauma | Self-Care – Workshop Definitions

**Secondary traumatic stress** refers to the presence of PTSD symptoms caused by at least one indirect exposure to trauma through a firsthand account or narrative/story of a traumatic event. Several other terms capture elements of this definition but are not all interchangeable with it.

**Vicarious trauma** describes the profound shift in world view that occurs in helping professionals when they work with individuals who have experienced trauma: helpers notice that their fundamental beliefs about the world are altered and possibly damaged by being repeatedly exposed to traumatic material. A domestic violence shelter worker may stop being able to believe that any relationship can be healthy. A child abuse investigator may lose trust in anyone who approaches their child. Again, examples of this abound and vary based on the type of work that we do.

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

**Compassion fatigue**, a label initially proposed as a less stigmatizing way to describe secondary traumatic stress, has been used interchangeably with that term and also as an umbrella term for STS, VT and burnout.

**Compassion satisfaction** refers to the positive feelings derived from competent performance as a helping professional. It is characterized by positive relationships with colleagues, and the conviction that one's work makes a meaningful contribution to clients and society

Secondary traumatic stress is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another. Its symptoms mimic those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). People affected by secondary stress may find themselves re-experiencing personal trauma or notice an increase in arousal and avoidance reactions related to the indirect trauma exposure. They may also experience changes in memory and perception; alterations in their sense of self-efficacy; a depletion of personal resources; and altered perceptions of safety, trust, and independence. A partial list of symptoms associated with secondary traumatic stress includes:

Hypervigilance	Hopelessness
Inability to embrace complexity	Inability to listen,
Avoidance of clients	Anger and cynicism
Sleeplessness	Fear
Chronic exhaustion	Physical ailments

Clearly, client care can be compromised if the helping professional is emotionally depleted or cognitively affected by secondary trauma. Some traumatized professionals, believing they can no longer be of service to their clients, end up leaving their jobs or the serving field altogether. Several studies have shown that the development of secondary traumatic stress often predicts that the helping professional will eventually leave the field for another type of work.

*These definitions were developed for the purpose of the Vicarious Trauma | Secondary Trauma | Self-Care workshop.*