

# Preventing Secondary Traumatic Stress in Educators



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## KEYWORDS

- Trauma • Educators • Schools • Secondary traumatic stress • Compassion fatigue
- Posttraumatic stress disorder

## KEY POINTS

- A foundational knowledge of secondary traumatic stress (STS), including identification of signs and symptoms and how it affects persons working in schools, is proposed.
- The US Department of Education is conducting training across the country that addresses why STS may be prevalent in the nation's schools.
- Readers are introduced to the evidence-informed intervention, Psychological First Aid: Listen, Protect, Connect, Model, and Teach.

## INTRODUCTION

School crisis teams have existed in the United States for more than 3 decades, with school personnel often on the front line in supporting students experiencing a crisis or trauma on campus or in their local community. Although increasing attention has recently been given to the mental health needs of students following traumatic events,<sup>1</sup> there has been a lack of recognition and services for school personnel, such as teachers, administrators, counselors, and others who may hear about a crisis or ongoing traumas of students but do not directly experience such events, despite these

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### Abbreviations

PTSD	Posttraumatic stress disorder
STS	Secondary traumatic stress

personnel suffering significant emotional sequelae that ultimately impair functioning. In more recent years, as experts have been called to support school communities after a disaster or major traumatic event, there has been growing recognition of the importance of addressing the stress that teachers and other school staff may experience as a result of their secondary exposure to traumatic events, resulting from their outreach to and care for students.

One example of a school district that was concerned about secondary traumatic stress (STS) of its teachers was in New Orleans. Although there was recognition of the mental health needs of students immediately following this disaster, teachers who supported these students had significant unmet needs. However, when a major oil spill affected whole communities in New Orleans 5 years after Hurricane Katrina, this event compounded the open wounds still healing from the hurricane for both students and teachers. It was this additional traumatic event, which had major economic repercussions to the area, which was the catalyst for district administrators and superintendents from across the greater New Orleans area to address the needs of both students and staff.

Concerned about their staff's well-being, local superintendents reached out to national experts, including Drs Marleen Wong and Robin Gurwitsch, to help them better understand the needs of their school communities. During the initial meeting, Dr Wong presented the concept of "compassion fatigue" that Dr Charles Figley had described more than a decade and a half ago that can affect those who are in "helping" professions.<sup>2</sup> There was overwhelming consensus among these superintendents that this conceptual reframing provided an important lens through which they could better understand their teachers' experiences. Subsequent meetings focused on how to support teachers who were experiencing compassion fatigue as a result of exposure to the traumas and stress of their students. Supported by the US Department of Education, Drs Wong and Gurwitsch developed a tool kit to support teachers with STS, which led to a series of US Department of Education supported training programs to enhance the response to stressful and traumatic experiences that have occurred in schools and districts throughout the United States.

This article describes what is known about compassion fatigue, otherwise known as STS, and how it may manifest in school personnel. The US Department of Education STS training programs, now considered best practices for supporting educators and other school staff in the prevention, intervention, and postintervention of STS, are then described.

### WHAT IS KNOWN ABOUT SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

STS has been defined as "the natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from *knowing* about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other—the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person."<sup>3</sup> Charles Figley (1983) initially described the "secondary catastrophic stress reactions" as the empathy that caregivers and family members can experience when a family member experiences a trauma.<sup>3</sup> He notes: "We, too become 'victims' because of our emotional connection with the victimized family member." He later conceptualized compassion fatigue as synonymous with STS, with overlapping symptoms associated

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