

Secondary trauma

Secondary trauma, or compassion fatigue, is an acute reaction that occurs as a result of the suffering of the people around us. It most often affects workers in the assistive professions, including health professionals, therapists and people working with refugees. It can also affect parents when they care for children who show signs of psychological trauma and intense stress. Secondary trauma is not a mental illness, but it can precede burnout syndrome and may even resemble post-traumatic stress disorder in a number of ways.

Signs of secondary trauma include:

- emotional, mental and physical exhaustion
- a tendency to isolate oneself
- anxiety, depression, crying frequently
- apathy
- sleeping problems
- irritability
- weight fluctuation
- headaches
- unpleasant and intrusive thoughts associated with another person's traumatic event
- hypersensitivity to any association to a stressful event
- increased consumption of alcohol, cigarettes or other addictive substances

There are a number of factors that increase the risk of developing secondary trauma, including:

- a sense of self-worth through how much you help others
- unrealistic expectations from yourself and others
- perfectionism
- fear of being judged for showing your vulnerability
- constant rejection of help from others
- a problem with saying no
- the tendency to prioritize caring for others over your personal life and self-care



People who have also been through a very stressful situation are more likely to experience secondary trauma. Therefore, if you are caring for a traumatised child, it may trigger memories and feelings associated with what happened to you in the past, or it may intensify the unpleasant experiences you are going through in the present.

What to do

Although there is no simple recipe for how to treat secondary trauma quickly and easily, there are many ways to help us relieve the accompanying discomfort and unpleasant symptoms in everyday life. One of them is to try to change our daily habits. These efforts are usually long-term but can produce positive and lasting results.

Another step we can take to look after ourselves is to learn to say NO in situations where we feel pressure from the people around us. You may find inspiration in the following sentences:

- *Thank you for asking, but no.*
- *I realize how important this is to you, but still, my answer is no.*
- *I understand that you really care about this, but no.*
- *I feel terrible about saying no, but I'm asking you to support my decision.*
- *I really don't know yet. Ask me later, please.*
- *There must be more options, and I would love to discuss them with you later.*
- *No. I'll let you know if my answer changes.*



Remember: In order to take good care of a child, you need to take good care of yourself. You can read more about what to do in **How to look after yourself**.

