

# LOOKING AFTER YOURSELF AND COLLEAGUES WHILE SUPPORTING LEARNERS: SECONDARY TRAUMA

## A GUIDE FOR FE MANAGERS AND LEADERS

WRITTEN BY EDUCATION SUPPORT

# Introduction

As further education (FE) staff are well aware, when working with young people and adults, there can be both a huge variety and an increased number of disclosures of trauma and incidents. It may be that for the first time they have the confidence to speak out about family issues or may experience difficulties when navigating relationships and friendships. FE staff need to be adequately prepared for any disclosures and know what to do in terms of both safeguarding the individual and supporting their own needs.

**Staff cannot support learners to achieve their aspirations and develop their skills if they are not mentally healthy themselves.** Secondary trauma is likely to be more of an issue for those in pastoral roles in FE. However, anyone can be affected. It should also be noted that there can be a cross-over between work and personal life. Individuals may also be affected by secondary trauma stemming from home as well.

## What is secondary trauma?

Secondary trauma can be an indirect experience of or exposure to a traumatic event. Many situations may trigger this type of trauma. It may be that you have heard an account of a traumatic event from either a colleague or learner which was emotionally challenging. **This can have a knock-on effect on your mental health and mean that you also need support.**

Whereas post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (a condition that emerges in the wake of highly traumatic events), is a relatively well-known condition, there is a growing awareness among mental health professionals of the problems posed by secondary trauma. Secondary trauma is much less talked about or understood but times are changing and organisations such as **Education Support** are giving this area more coverage to enable a deeper understanding of the impact. This will allow organisations to better support this type of trauma and enable individuals to obtain important signposting to seek help.

# Signs of secondary trauma

There is a range of associated symptoms of secondary trauma which have been set out in this [\*\*Education Support article and video\*\*](#):



**Flashbacks**  
or **repeating the traumatic experience** over and over again



**Avoiding certain scenarios** or situations that remind you of what you have been told



**Negative changes in beliefs** and feelings which can lead to **anxiety and depression**



**Hyper arousal:** a feeling of always being alert and that the littlest thing can set you on edge

**There are also other factors commonly associated with secondary trauma:**

**Compassion fatigue** – whereby the ability to provide support in difficult situations is inhibited by feelings of numbness or lack of empathy.

**Burnout** – This is prevalent in the education sector anyway due to work/life balance issues as a result of stressors which can build up over time leading eventually to a situation where everyday life is significantly affected.

**Vicarious trauma** – Vicarious trauma can present as a 'shift' in attitude or change in worldview after prolonged exposure to someone else's suffering. This is a process of internal change resulting from empathetic engagement with trauma survivors. This can affect anyone who is hearing about traumatic events on a regular basis.



**Psychotherapist Ben Amponsah discusses secondary trauma in Education Support's video**



# What does it look like in FE settings?



There is a wide variety of FE settings which will also vary in terms of employers and workplace wellbeing procedures and practices. Here are some examples of what secondary trauma could be caused by and look like.

## Cause examples

1. A colleague or learner discloses information about a personal issue to you which is very delicate and sensitive.
2. You have a pastoral role and know about a variety of learner issues, some of which are very traumatic.

## Presentation examples

1. You may have difficulty concentrating on your work out of concern for individuals and thinking about what you have been told. This may include PTSD-style flashbacks that involve involuntarily and vividly reliving the traumatic event and can have a significant impact on your day-to-day life.
2. You may have heard about a variety of traumatic experiences and started to feel 'numb' in your everyday life due to compassion fatigue.
3. You may avoid certain places as a result of the information given. This could also be subconscious avoidance.

## Why do staff need support with secondary trauma?

As we're told in the safety instructions on planes, you have to put your mask on first before you can help someone else. **In other words it's difficult to look after others if you are struggling yourself.**

**It's so easy to get caught up in trying to help learners or colleagues with their trauma that we forget about our own, burying or masking it as we try to get by in life.** Add to this the fact that FE staff care deeply about their learners and the purpose of their work, and it can be easy not to accept personal struggles and promote a culture of constantly striving no matter the cost.

For some staff, secondary trauma may go unnoticed for a long time, then build up until it becomes so unmanageable they have to be signed off work or are unable to continue in their chosen profession. A mentally healthy workforce will be better placed to support learners and ensure valuable FE staff are retained for future generations.



## How to deal with secondary trauma

We've looked at how it can help to be aware of the symptoms of secondary trauma and watch out for them in yourself and colleagues. But how can you deal with the symptoms of secondary trauma? Take a look below at some of our tips for individuals and organisations.

### As an individual

As a FE leader or manager there are a number of ways you might want to consider looking after your mental wellbeing when it comes to mitigating the effects of secondary trauma. The dictionary definition of wellbeing is the state of being comfortable, healthy and happy. It relates to anything to do with health, comfort and happiness. Mental wellbeing is about how you feel about yourself and how you deal with life's challenges.

As a starting point, you might consider the different types of self-care and how they look for you. What are you doing to look after your own mental and physical wellbeing? Do you feel like you have a balance between them? What would you like to do more/less of?





## Types of Self-care



### Recuperative

Recuperative self-care means allowing your mind to rest and relax. It looks different for everyone, but might include reading, mindfulness, talking to loved ones, or simply getting enough sleep.



### Restorative

Whether it's walking more, going to the gym or swimming. Keeping your body in good shape physically through exercise and diet will help you better deal with things on an emotional level.



### Recreational

Communal activities where you get outside and connect with people can be another way to combat the effects of secondary trauma. Again, this will look different for everyone but might include sports, outings or community groups where you take part in a hobby you enjoy.

## Recognising the signs and reaching out

Finally, it can help to identify the skills and strategies that work best for you when signs of secondary trauma appear.

Don't be afraid to connect with others and ask for help. It has been proven that talking about our feelings helps us resolve difficult emotions. **Talk about your feelings with people you trust, such as loved ones, friends, colleagues, support groups, or seek support from your GP.**

**Education Support is a further resource for those working in education. They have a free and confidential helpline 24/7. You don't need to be in crisis to talk with qualified counsellors about what you are experiencing. Call 08000 562 561.**

## As an organisation

There are many ways you can promote and prioritise staff care as an organisation; and what works for one FE setting may not work for another. However, it might help to ask yourself these questions as a starting point:

- **Do we talk about mental health as an organisation?**
- **Do we acknowledge the mental and emotional needs of staff?**
- **Do we encourage staff to get help if they are struggling?**
- **Do staff know how/where to get support?**
- **What support do we provide for staff?**
- **What are we doing to ensure staff are working in a psychologically safe environment?**





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## Signposting to further support

Would you know where to signpost a colleague who is struggling? Is there accessible and clear information about the referral pathways for a staff member who might be experiencing secondary trauma? These are both questions to ask regardless of whether a colleague needs support as the information could be needed at any time.

### Sources of further support to consider are:

- **A GP referral**
- **Find an NHS psychological therapy service** - The NHS Talking Therapies, for anxiety and depression programme (formerly known as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies, IAPT) - <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-nhs-talking-therapies-service>
- **Assist Trauma Care** – Offers telephone counselling and support to individuals and families in the aftermath of trauma. Tel: **01788 551919**.  
<http://assisttraumacare.org.uk/>
- **Education Support Helpline: 08000 562 561**

Professional supervision might be another option to consider in your FE setting, as an intervention that can help staff process the emotional content they are dealing with in their roles. While supervision is not intended to deal with secondary trauma, it can be helpful in providing a safe and confidential space to talk about, and process what is going on at work. You will work with trained professional supervisors to focus on your mental wellbeing and help you develop new coping strategies to feel more fulfilled and in control.

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**Education Support** is the only UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff in schools, colleges and universities. You don't need to be in crisis to talk with qualified counsellors about anything you are experiencing. You can call their **free and confidential helpline 24/7 on 08000 562 561**. Or check out [educationsupport.org.uk](https://educationsupport.org.uk) for free resources and tools to help you and your colleagues.

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