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Children and Families

Secondary Traumatic Stress and the Systems Change Review Process General Tips and Resources

"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). Accordingly, individuals 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 disruption in their perceptions of safety, trust, and independence."

- National Child Traumatic Stress Network (nctsn.org)

The Systems Change Review process, designated by the Division of Safety and Permanency (DSP) to be used for critical incidents qualified for further review under Act 78, is designed to be collaborative in nature, and focused on identifying both strength and opportunity across every level of the system. Act 78 cases are the most extreme cases of child maltreatment, including child death, serious injury and egregious incidents of abuse and neglect. These cases can evoke strong feelings in child welfare professionals, sometimes leading to actions or behaviors that are damaging or unproductive, including a tendency to assign blame. This handout provides some tips and resources as you proceed in this process.

General Tips for Attending to Secondary Traumatic Stress

- Provide an opportunity for the child welfare professionals involved in the case to collectively process their feelings, fears, grief, and doubts prior to and immediately following an incident
- Address the false belief that child welfare professionals and the child welfare system hold enough control to protect every child from every kind of harm
- Acknowledge the fact that child welfare professionals work with individuals who make their own choices and hold their own autonomy
- Acknowledge the pressure and great responsibility of representing such vulnerable individuals
- Encourage self-care strategies and help identify ways that child welfare professionals stay connected with the goodness of this world and the importance of their well-being to the helping process
- Keep an eye out for signs of secondary traumatic stress, such as nightmares, intrusive thoughts, chronic fatigue, sadness, anger, poor concentration, second guessing, detachment, emotional exhaustion, fearfulness, shame, physical illness, absenteeism, etc.
- Provide a referral to an employee assistance program (EAP), if needed

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- Encourage connection and open discussion between child welfare professionals and between direct service professionals and their supervisor
- Recognize that individual needs and responses to the situation may vary for each professional, and be prepared to respond accordingly or modify one's approach to workforce needs
- Discuss the community's response to or perception of the incident to develop team support and to help child welfare professionals prepare for challenging reactions, including public encounters and media attention
- Provide additional training and support to help child welfare professionals feel mastery over their job

Systems Change Review Process Recommendations

- Make it very clear that the System Change Review process is not about ascribing blame, but rather presents a very important learning opportunity for the agency to understand the local child welfare and other service systems
- Use the Systems Change Review process to acknowledge strengths of the child welfare professional, the local child welfare agency and the local service system
- Allow the child welfare professional to opt out of the Human Factors Debriefing process, if she or he desires
- Consider having someone who the child welfare professional feels supported by available before and after the Human Factors Debriefing session

Additional Resources

- Overview of Secondary Traumatic Stress
  http://www.nctsn.org/resources/topics/secondary-traumatic-stress

- *Secondary Trauma and the Child Welfare Workforce* by The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/CW360_2012.pdf

- *The Resilience Alliance: Promoting Resilience and Reducing Secondary Trauma Among Child Welfare Staff* by The ACS/NYU Children's Trauma Institute
  - o Participant Handbook:
    http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/resilience_alliance_participant_handbook.pdf
  - o Training manual:
    http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/resilience_alliance_training_manual.pdf

- *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others* by Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky and Connie Burk

- Further resource lists can be found here:
  http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/nrcfcpp/teleconferences/5-12-10/secondary%20trauma.pdf