

**RECOGNIZING AND SUPPORTING NETWORK MEMBERS
EXPERIENCING SECONDARY TRAUMA:
A RESOURCE GUIDE**

This guide is designed to provide resources to Innocence Network members who work with and represent individuals who have been wrongfully convicted to recognize and provide staff, students, interns and volunteers support for secondary trauma that stems from our work. This guide does not attempt to address every experience related to secondary trauma and organizations may vary in scope and structure which may render some resources less helpful; but this guide serves as a starting point.¹

WHAT IS SECONDARY TRAUMA?

“Secondary trauma is a type of trauma that is caused by indirectly experiencing a traumatic event (typically by hearing details or witnessing the outcome of a traumatic experience.” (Sabrina Romanoff, Psy.D., licensed clinical psychologist.)

“Simply speaking, a traumatic experience is anything where your life or the life of someone you love is in danger...So secondary trauma can occur when you...talk to people who have had these [traumatic] experiences. (Jeff Temple, Ph.D., licensed psychologist.)

² Innocence Network members spend decades immersed in horrific crime scenarios and we have a parallel existence to the horrific trauma and tragedies suffered by our clients stemming from their wrongful convictions and their years taken. It is inevitable that the trauma stemming from our cases and our clients’ lives will trickle into our mental health; this is secondary trauma.

Two major things can stand in the way of us recognizing secondary trauma exists, its impact on our work and well-being, and ways to address it. 1) Perspective: No matter what we are feeling or struggling with, we often compare our trauma to our client’s personal trauma and experiences and in comparison, ours become trivial; and 2) Better lawyers are those who do not feel trauma: A common misbelief in our work and other similar spaces is that there is a “badge of honor,” *per se*, for *not feeling trauma* doing the work that we do. Organization leaders should disabuse staff (and themselves) of these things to create a safe and productive environment where it is not only *okay to feel* trauma, but it is *normal* to do so and that is part of being a strong advocate.

To assist those who may be experiencing secondary trauma, we recommend Network members learn how to recognize the signs and symptoms of someone (including themselves) experiencing secondary trauma. Organizations may want to consider this information when creating

¹ The contents of this Guide were inspired by research conducted by the Innocence Network Secondary Trauma Working Group, by the results of a survey produced and disseminated to all Network Members by the Working Group, and by spoken and written feedback obtained during the Working Groups’ Panel discussion held at the 2023 Innocence Network Conference.

² *Secondary Trauma: What is it, Who it Affects And How to Cope, According to Experts*. Meaghan Harmon (May 8, 2023), quotes from Romanoff and Temple, members of the Forbes Health Advisory Board, [Secondary Trauma: What It Is And How To Cope – Forbes Health](#)

organizational structure/policy and provide this information as part of staff training.

IDENTIFYING AND DEFINING THE ISSUE

I. Secondary Trauma Defined:

- Secondary Trauma is sometimes also referred to as Vicarious Trauma, Secondary Stress Disorder or Insidious Trauma.
- Mental health care providers in the grief, loss, and trauma fields often hear detailed and harrowing stories about the unfair, undeserved, and often unimaginable traumatic experiences that their clients have endured.
- Secondary trauma occurs when an individual who was not an immediate witness to the trauma absorbs and integrates disturbing aspects of the traumatic experience into their own functioning. Some precursors that you might hear about are compassion fatigue or burnout.

II. How to Recognize Secondary Trauma:

- Secondary trauma often carries many of the same symptoms as first-hand trauma, most often recognized as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These symptoms are usually grouped into three broad categories:
 - Intrusions, such as flashbacks, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts;
 - Avoidance of situations, people or places that bring on the intrusions; and
 - Hyperarousal, including hypervigilance, sleeplessness, and increased startle response (“jumpiness”).

III. Why it is Important to Identify and Recognize Secondary Trauma:

- The purpose of recognizing and supporting staff experiencing secondary trauma on an organizational level is not just “making staff happier.” There are direct effects on organizational capacity if secondary trauma is not addressed, such as burnout, less productivity, higher staff turnover, difficulty communicating with clients/traumatized individuals, overall well-being of staff, etc.
- Leaders should be pragmatic because to run an effective organization, secondary trauma should be taken seriously.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CREATING AN INFORMED CULTURE ON SECONDARY TRAUMA

A trauma-informed organization recognizes that exposure to the traumatic experiences of others, can have a direct impact on staff. Not all staff, students, interns, or volunteers will be affected the same.

- **Be Proactive not Reactive**

Organizations should recognize the issues surrounding secondary trauma and strive to be proactive and not reactive about addressing its impact on staff. For example, rather than having meetings when secondary trauma manifests, hold space on a regular basis for staff to have conversations about these issues.

- **Support Comes from the Top**

The culture of any organization comes from the top, so Executive Directors are encouraged to implement the suggestions in this guide. The Secondary Trauma Working Group surveyed the Innocence Network in early 2023 on this topic. Most of those who responded to the survey were staff and most said they were unaware of any support available in their organization for secondary trauma. These observations invite consistent efforts for a culture shift. For example, our colleagues in the United Kingdom shared that for many law firms the *focus* is on wellbeing and mental health.

Executive Directors and other supervisors should recognize that staff might not feel comfortable disclosing how they are feeling or going to leadership, which is why leaders should start this conversation. Sharing our own experiences is a productive way of getting staff to feel comfortable discussing this topic and understanding that they are not alone. Staff also expressed concerns that attorneys are the most resistant in their organizations to recognize and address secondary trauma in their own lives.

- **Reducing the Effects of Secondary Trauma**

Included below are suggestions on how to negate the effects of secondary trauma, as well as to inform management and staff on ways to proactively engage with issues related to secondary trauma.

I. Management and Supervision:

- Ensure that supportive, respectful, and effective supervision includes open discussion about secondary trauma, collectively or individually in confidence, strategies for addressing it, and compliance with relevant policies.
- Ensure that Management understands and has read through resources related to secondary trauma.
- Put it out there.
 - Discuss secondary trauma from the start with new hires.
 - Put a blurb in your class syllabus so students are aware of it as they enter your clinic.
 - Rather than a Monday morning case meeting, make specific meetings solely addressing self-care and support.
 - Hold restorative circles.
- Include questions related to secondary trauma and self-care techniques during performance evaluations.
- Host a trauma-informed lawyering training for all staff, students, interns and volunteers.
- Ensure staff are taking appropriate vacation and sick time and enforce a “turn off” time during vacation time.
 - For example, directors or managers should respect these boundaries and not send emails or text messages or make calls during this time to respect staff’s need for space. Consider “scheduling” the email so that it gets off your plate, but doesn’t land on your staff’s plate until they return from vacation.
- Recognize that for some staff, they cannot “tap out” because the work is very personal.

- Identify an experienced counselor who specializes in secondary trauma to refer staff to and allow staff to use work time for those appointments.
 - A suggestion also includes mandating at least one therapy session a year for each staff member.
 - Recognize financial restrictions of staff, students, interns and volunteers. Consider stipends for therapy or identifying pro bono services. Identify and possibly partner with the School of Social Work if you are at an institution to obtain pro bono resources.
 - Please note that for organizations that have social workers on staff, be conscientious that staff social workers' main responsibilities are not to provide therapy sessions for staff. However, social workers have the skills and perspective that is valuable and could support the staff with trainings or facilitating group discussions.
- Ensure staff have a diverse caseload. Most governmental offices have rotations so that practitioners are not facing the same subject matter for prolonged periods of time to reduce the resulting trauma.

II. Staff Health and Wellness:

- Raise staff awareness of professional and personal self-care strategies for addressing secondary trauma.
- Encourage staff to practice self-care both on and off work time. Wellness days.
 - Have a group lunch at least once a week.
 - Have an office-wide hike or walk. Something that encourages movement.
- Include coverage for mental health services in staff health benefits.
- Encourage staff to use secondary trauma/burnout self-assessments to gauge where they are at.
- Encourage and support staff participation in continuing education opportunities, including workshops, CLEs, and conferences to strengthen professional practices and to improve responses to secondary trauma.
- Promote mental health days and staff retreat days where staff can practice self-care techniques such as exercise, healthy eating, and quality sleep and using stress-reduction techniques such as yoga, meditation, mindfulness, and breathing exercises.
- Subscribe to applications like "Wellness Coach." Some organizations have successfully worked out free membership for law students.

III. Additional Considerations for Staff:

- Ask prospective staff and interns if they have worked with people affected by trauma, and if so, how they managed that.
- Establish organizational culture early and explain the policies to new staff. Some policy questions/considerations for organization leaders:
 - Do office leaders take their paid time off?
 - Do office leaders take lunch breaks or step outside of the office periodically?
 - Do office leaders expect others to always arrive early and stay late?
 - Is the office space itself conducive to self-care (windows, plants, a place to prepare meals, a place other than one's desk to eat lunch, etc.)?
- Establish and train new staff on boundaries around cell phones. Staff should not

- regularly call each other's cell phones outside of office hours unless there is an emergency. Do clients have staff cell phone numbers, if so, what are the norms around when it is OK to call?
- For staff not using their paid time off, ask them what leadership needs to do to make it possible for them to take it. When used, protect paid time off from office calls, texts, or other requests.
 - Normalize staff going to mental health appointments during regular business hours.
 - Leadership should prioritize access to comprehensive health insurance if financially possible. The consequence of inadequate health insurance is spending more time and money training new staff when your current staff burn out.
 - Request your health insurance provider send a one-page document summarizing the plan's mental health offerings that can be distributed to staff.
 - Provide and encourage staff options like an art therapy session, yoga class onsite, and other staff activities that do not center around drinking. Create relationships with these providers to try and negotiate or structure activities that would be free or low cost for staff of the organization.
 - Make sure resources provided do not make staff feel pressured to share personal information in work-related spaces.

Resources for Innocence Network Members

I. Local/State Resources:

- Meditation and Mindfulness
- Yoga
- Encouraging staff to participate in CLEs or webinars on secondary trauma, wellness, and self-care.
- For organizations embedded in or affiliated with law schools, identify counseling or other related trauma services provided by the school.
- Reach out to your local school of social work to see if they have students who could work with you on this.

II. Books

- *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*, Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky.
- *The Age of Overwhelm: Strategies for the Long Haul*, Laura Van Dernoot Lipsky.
- *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Lewis Herman.
- *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Bessel A. Van der Kolk.
- *The Compassion Fatigue Workbook: Creative Tools for Transforming Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Traumatization*, Francoise Mathieu
- *Restoring Sanctuary: A New Operating System for Trauma-Informed Systems of Care*, Sandra L. Bloom, Brian Farragher.

III. Online Resources

- ProQol, <https://proqol.org/self-care-tools-1>
- The National Association for Public Defense (NAPD) offers many training sessions

- online around secondary trauma and resilience, <https://www.publicdefenders.us/>
- Wake Forest Law School's symposium on Secondary Trauma in Lawyering, <http://www.wakeforestlawreview.com/2021-spring-symposium/>
- Be Sustained: Well Being for Public Defenders, resources and trainings available, <https://besustained.org/>
- The National Academy of Continuing Legal Education provides numerous CLEs for secondary/vicarious trauma, [NACLE | CLE Credits At Your Fingertips](#)
- American Bar Association CLEs on secondary trauma, [Starting the Conversation about Secondary Trauma \(americanbar.org\)](#)
- Trauma-Informed Lawyering, [Trauma-Informed Lawyering \(acl.gov\)](#)
- Wellness and Mental Health in the Legal Profession Podcast, <https://law.stanford.edu/media/wellnesscast/#slnav-about>
- Top 12 Self-Care tips for Helpers, <http://compassionfatigue.org/pages/Top12SelfCareTips.pdf>
- A Guided Self-Care Assessment for Helping Professionals, <https://www.goodtherapy.org/blog/guided-self-care-assessment-for-helping-professionals-0919165>

What Some Other Innocence Network Organizations Are Already Doing!

- A psychologist works with staff on an ongoing basis or at least during specific difficult events.
- Training sessions with trauma experts.
- Employer-provided out-of-network mental health benefits.
- Employer-provided acupuncture benefits.
- Flexible work schedules.
- Mandatory sabbaticals for those at the organization for a longer period of time.
- Open discussions of the issue.
- A culture promoting staff to take the paid time off they have earned.
- Quarterly burn-out trainings.
- Leadership that encourages individuals to seek professional help for trauma.
- Leadership that promotes work-life balance.
- Staff lunches and other get-togethers.
- Regular one-on-one staff check-ins with leadership.

What Some Staff Are Requesting

- Innocence Network support.
- Wellness seminars.
- Network webinars and presentations.
- Office trainings facilitated by mental health professionals.
- Stipend to offset therapy sessions.
- More information on how to recognize that someone in the office is struggling.
- Best practices on setting boundaries.
- Guidance on developing self-care plans.
- Mandatory Diversity, Equity and Inclusion trainings.

- Trainings on how to mentally prepare for client visits and how to debrief/decompress after.
- Trainings on how to set up boundaries with clients.
- Providing a list of referrals for local, in-network mental health service providers.

If you have any questions about this guide or would like more information, please reach out to the Secondary Trauma Committee at secondarytrauma@innocencenetwork.org