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When Nonprofit Work Can Lead To Secondary Traumatic Stress, Here's How To Manage It

Asher Ben Arieh Former Forbes Councils Member
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Asher Ben Arieh

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A lot of what we do in the nonprofit sector is supporting people in a time of need. This includes helping communities rebuild themselves after a natural disaster, helping a family through tough economic times or helping individuals overcome challenging circumstances like addiction, unemployment, damaging relationships and more. While there are positive aspects, rewards and satisfaction in helping and supporting others, many nonprofit roles can also expose staff members and volunteers to high stress.

In other words, the very nature of the type of work we do exposes us to trauma on a daily basis -- people often come to us in distress, and that puts us at risk for being affected by their distress. This is called “secondary traumatic stress,” which is defined by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network as: “The emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another.” Secondary traumatic stress is related to other similar concepts, like compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma and burnout.

The nonprofit I lead deals with a challenging cause: prevention, identification and treatment of child maltreatment. My team may be exposed to traumatic events on a daily basis. Child welfare workers, for example, a group we work closely with, are required to investigate child abuse, remove children from their homes, interact with hostile parents, and support children as they recount horrible stories of child abuse and neglect. These job duties make child welfare a challenging line of work to be in.

Only recently have we begun to understand the implications of secondary traumatization on professionals: fatigue, mood disturbance, over sensitivity, nightmares, anxiety, detachment and isolation. When these symptoms occur, workers can become careless or less restricted and harm may be done to themselves or their clients.

Given the stressful nature of our work, if we as a sector do not deal with the phenomenon of secondary trauma, our efforts to have a positive impact on some of society’s most challenging problems will be thwarted by our workers' severe levels of exhaustion.

So, what can and should be done?

We need to listen to the needs of professionals in the field.

One of the things I learned in my 30 years of experience is to never assume you know what others need. People are different; we all bring our strengths and weaknesses to work, which influence what puts us at risk for secondary trauma or for successfully coping with secondary trauma.

Who is more at risk? Helping professionals, highly empathic people, people with prior trauma experience, people with frequent exposure to trauma, people who are socially or organizationally isolated and people with inadequate training.

Talk to your employees in the field and ask them what they need on three levels: personal, interpersonal and organizational. Ensure you have a clear understanding of the different types of stress they face, where they already feel supported and where they need additional support and guidance.

One tool that can be helpful is the Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) self-assessment, a 30-item self-report on the positive and negative aspects of caring. The tool measures compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue, including burnout and secondary trauma.

We need to help professionals deal with their fears and secondary traumatization.

Organizations need to share responsibility for their employees' well-being and implement internal procedures for training and supervision, which can mitigate the effects of secondary trauma.

• **Awareness:** Don't be afraid to talk about it! Start from the beginning by raising awareness on the issue of secondary trauma in your organization.

• **Work-Life Balance:** In order to help individuals cope with secondary trauma, promote a healthy work-life balance in your organization. This includes a healthy lifestyle, adequate sleep hours, exercise and leisure activity with friends. If needed, even "force" people to take time for themselves.

• **Training And Supervision:** Introduce your employees to stress management practices, such as mindfulness and meditation, and provide regular professional supervision to discuss well-being.

• **Teamwork:** Develop a culture of support (formal and informal) between teams to deal with work challenges in a positive, empowering and supportive way.

• **Share Success Stories:** Focus on success stories -- not only on failures -- and share knowledge, experiences and expertise inside the organization.

We need to let professionals know that we value their work.

Most importantly, we need to show our employees that they are not alone. Secondary trauma is part of the nature of our profession and not a sign of weakness. Most of us understand the need to take care of ourselves, both personally and professionally but find it difficult to find time and motivation to integrate self-care strategies in our day-to-day lives.

Part of our job as leaders in our sector is to ensure we promote the best conditions for our employees and colleagues to thrive and continue to do the important life-changing work that they do.

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Asher Ben Arieh

Prof. Asher Ben-Arieh, PhD, is the Director of the Haruv Institute in Jerusalem, Israel.

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