

Secondary Trauma and Foster Parents: Understanding its Impact and Taking Steps to Protect Them

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Introduction

Foster Parents work daily, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with children who have been traumatized. They listen to their stories and feel their hurt. Empathy is often the most important tool foster parents bring to helping the children in their care. Unfortunately, the more empathic they are the greater their risk for internalizing the trauma of their foster children. The result of this engagement is *secondary traumatic stress*.

What is secondary traumatic stress? How is it the same and/or different from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

According to Dr. Charles Figley, author of *Compassion Fatigue, Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder*, secondary traumatic stress is “the natural consequent behaviors resulting from knowledge about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other. It is the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person”. Until recently, when we spoke about persons being traumatized we were speaking only of those people who were directly exposed to the trauma. We referred to their condition as post-traumatic stress disorder. Examples of such persons were Vietnam War veterans and/or victims of domestic violence.

In the last 15 years, we have come to recognize that people, who work with,

listen to and try and help children and adults who have been traumatized are at risk for internalizing their trauma. This condition is called secondary traumatic stress. The only difference between post-traumatic stress disorder and secondary trauma is that with secondary trauma you are “a step away” from the trauma. The symptoms of primary or secondary trauma can be exactly the same!

*“The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.”**

**(Rachel Remen, Kitchen Table Wisdom)*

Why are foster parents at risk for developing secondary traumatic stress?

There are several reasons why foster parents are at risk for developing secondary trauma. Listed below are just a few of those reasons.

1) Empathy: Empathy is an important tool we use to help children and families who have been traumatized. Our clients, and children in particular, feel valued and heard when we empathize with them. However, if we over empathize or over-identify with our clients we place ourselves at risk of internalizing their trauma.

2) Insufficient Recovery Time: Foster parents often listen to their foster children describe some horrific events they have experienced. In addition, foster parents often hear the same or similar horror stories over and over again. With children in their home 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, they are often deprived of the "time off" they need to heal or to get some distance from what they have heard. Secondary trauma is cumulative, so listening to these stories over and over again can have a negative effect on even the most compassionate and resilient foster parents.

3) Unresolved Personal Trauma: Many foster parents have had some personal loss or even traumatic experience in their own life (e.g., loss of a family member, death of a close friend, physical or emotional abuse). To some extent, the pain of their own experience(s) can be "re-activated" when they hear the child describe a traumatic situation similar to the one they experienced. Unless the foster parent has healed from their own trauma they are at increased risk for internalizing the trauma of their foster child.

4) Children are the Most Vulnerable Members of Our Society: Young children are completely dependent on adults for their emotional and physical needs. When adults maltreat children, it evokes a strong reaction in any person who cares about children. As the primary caretakers for vulnerable children, foster parents are at increased risk for having a strong emotional reaction to what they hear and learn about from these children. The inability of the foster parents to change the

situation can make them feel even more vulnerable (Figley, 1995)

How do you know if you are suffering from secondary traumatic stress?

One of the most difficult tasks for a foster parent is to recognize if they are suffering from secondary traumatic stress. Every person reacts differently and copes differently with their reaction to adversity. What one person finds helpful may not be helpful for another person and vice versa. All people must remember to call on the coping mechanisms that work best for them. There are, however, several "individual indicators of distress" which can tell us that we are at increased risk for developing secondary trauma. A key indicator is when you find yourself acting and feeling in ways that don't feel normal to you. It is normal for all of us to have a range of emotions that include anger, sadness, depression or anxiety. However, when these emotions become more extreme or prolonged than usual, it is a potential indicator of distress (see table below).

When you begin to see or feel, in yourself, emotional or physical indicators of extreme distress, it is time to step back and evaluate yourself. Are there specific images or cases that keep coming into your head again and again? Are there situations with children that provoke anxiety that you are trying to avoid? Are there situations or people that remind you of a particularly distressing case? If you are experiencing some of these indicators, on a consistent basis, you should reach out and ask for help from another foster parent or from your caseworker. If the trauma symptoms become severe and last for more than a few days, you

should consider seeing a therapist who specializes in trauma work.

Emotional Indicators

- Anger
- Sadness
- Prolonged Grief
- Anxiety

Physical Indicators

- Headaches
- Stomach aches
- Back aches
- Exhaustion

Personal Indicators

- Self-isolation
- Cynicism
- Mood swings
- Irritability

Self-Care Strategies for Combating Secondary Trauma Stress

Understanding your own needs and responding appropriately is of paramount importance in combating secondary traumatic stress. For foster parents it is critically important to find ways to “get a break” from parenting. To avoid feeling overwhelmed by feelings of frustration and sadness it is important to engage in activities you consider fun and playful. Any person working with maltreated or traumatized children needs to set aside time to rest, emotionally and physically, and to engage in activities that restore their sense of hope

Remember, in the end, our ability to help children who have suffered depends upon our ability to care for ourselves....physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually, so we can be there for them when they need us.

Let me close by saying, in approaching your work please listen to the wisdom of

the following passage by Marc Parent is his book, *Turning Stones: My Days and Nights with Children at Risk*.

“Rescuing one child from the harm of one night is glorious success. The evening is an opportunity to touch a life at a critical moment and make it better—not for a lifetime, not even for tomorrow, but for one moment. One moment—not to talk, but to act—not to change the world, but to make it better. It’s all that can be done and not only is that enough—that’s brilliant.”*

Recommended Reading

Figley, C.R. (Ed.) (1995). *Compassion fatigue: Coping with secondary traumatic stress in those who treat the traumatized*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Stamm, B.H. (1995). *Secondary traumatic stress: Self-care issues for clinicians, researchers, and educators*. Maryland: Sidran Press.

Herman, J. (1997). *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: BasicBooks.

Parent, M. (1996). *Turning Stones: My Days and Nights with Children at Risk*. New York: Ballantine

About the Author

David Conrad has been a social worker for over 30 years. He has worked as a child protection caseworker and supervisor. He currently serves as a Senior Instructor with JFK Partners/Department of Pediatrics at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado. To learn more about secondary trauma or to talk with him about providing secondary trauma training, please contact him at Conrad.David@tchden.org or at 303-861-6183.