

STRATEGIES TO PREVENT AND ADDRESS SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS IN EDUCATORS



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Suggested Audience: K-12 School Leaders and Consultants

Authors: Jerica Knox, PhD; Tamara K. Lawson, PhD; & Mayra Gaona, PhD

This brief outlines how school and district leaders can use educational psychology practices to develop more effective programming and mental health supports for educators.

WHAT IS SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS?

Secondary traumatic stress is the emotional, cognitive, and physical reactions that arise from learning about or witnessing the traumatic experiences of others.¹ Secondary traumatic stress is common in helping professions where people routinely engage with others' adversity and distress.² Common symptoms include intrusive thoughts or images, hypervigilance or emotional numbing, difficulty concentrating or sleeping, irritability, and avoidance of reminders related to others' trauma.¹



WHY ADDRESS SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS IN SCHOOLS?

- 1. Educators regularly support students experiencing adversity and trauma,** placing them at elevated risk for emotional exhaustion and secondary traumatic stress.^{2,3}
- 2. High levels of secondary traumatic stress reduce instructional effectiveness,** impair decision-making, and make it harder to maintain supportive classroom environments.⁴
- 3. Secondary traumatic stress contributes to educator turnover,** disrupting stability, weakening school climate, and limiting access to experienced teachers.^{3,4}
- 4. Without intentional support, secondary traumatic stress widens existing inequities,** with racially minoritized educators disproportionately affected by trauma exposure.⁵

WHICH EDUCATORS ARE MOST AT-RISK FOR SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS?⁵

- Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic experiences that occur before the age of 18. ACEs shape stress vulnerability later in life. Educators fall into distinct ACEs profiles, reflecting different patterns of childhood adversity.
- High exposure to ACEs is linked to greater secondary traumatic stress in educators, highlighting the need for supports that promote emotional safety and reduce re-traumatization.
- Racially minoritized educators are disproportionately represented in higher adversity profiles, increasing vulnerability to secondary traumatic stress. This calls for practices that address systemic barriers and affirm minoritized identities.

THE ROLE OF TRAUMA-INFORMED AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES IN SUPPORTING EDUCATORS

Schools play a critical role in creating environments that protect educators from the emotional toll of supporting students experiencing adversity. **Trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices are often discussed in the context of supporting students, but they are equally essential for supporting the adults who serve them.** Educators frequently carry the emotional weight of student trauma while also managing their own histories of adversity and identity-based stressors, making intentional support critical.

- Trauma-informed practices help create environments where educators feel emotionally safe, supported, and equipped with strategies to manage stress and prevent re-traumatization.^{6,7}
- Culturally responsive practices ensure that these supports honor educators' identities, acknowledge the impact of systemic inequities, and reduce the disproportionate burden placed on racially minoritized staff.⁷

Together, these approaches provide a foundation for school systems to prevent, reduce, and respond to secondary traumatic stress in ways that strengthen educator well-being.



TRAUMA-INFORMED, CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE STRATEGIES TO REDUCE AND ADDRESS SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

Create predictable and emotionally safe work environments by offering clear routines, advance notice of schedule changes, and supportive supervisory practices that reduce uncertainty and prevent re-traumatization.

Give educators structured time to process stress, such as brief check-ins, facilitated debriefs after difficult student interactions, or dedicated wellness/reflection spaces during the workday.

Provide practical regulation tools educators can use immediately, such as grounding strategies, breathing techniques, microbreaks, and access to calm-down areas—helping staff manage stress before it escalates.

Reduce identity-based emotional labor by avoiding disproportionate reliance on racially minoritized staff to lead equity, culture, or wellness efforts, and ensuring those who do take on this work receive compensation and protected time.

Train leaders and staff to recognize and respond to secondary traumatic stress. The University of Kentucky offers [validated screening tools](#) for secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and related constructs.

Affirm educator identity and belonging through culturally relevant mentorship groups, affinity spaces, and leadership practices that acknowledge systemic inequities and promote psychological safety for marginalized staff.

AUTHOR CONTACTS:

Jerica Knox, University of Maryland School of Medicine
Jerica.knox@som.umaryland.edu



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