

Secondary Trauma and Self-Care for Support Group Leaders

Frequent, repeated, or continuous exposure to other people's trauma. Sound familiar? This is a common definition for secondary traumatic stress (STS) or vicarious trauma. It is a condition that often affects social workers, first responders, and others who routinely engage with people in moments of crisis or who are reliving and retelling their trauma narratives as part of the healing process.

As an adoption, foster, or kinship support group leader, you are vulnerable to STS or vicarious trauma for three reasons:

1. You likely have your own experiences caring for children who have experienced trauma and loss.
2. You meet with and lead a group of other caregivers, often hearing the stories of the trauma they experience while parenting as well as the stories of their children's trauma histories.
3. As a leader, you are likely to be in a position to provide one-on-one support to members who are having additional challenges.

That's a lot of trauma-weight to hold on your shoulders. How can you successfully lead while also coping with your own frequent exposure to the trauma of others?

When flight attendants provide safety instructions, they always include the reminder to "put your own oxygen mask on first" before assisting anyone who

might need your help. This is simple advice but is not always easy to follow, particularly for those in leadership positions. Taking time for self-care may seem indulgent, unnecessary, or simply impossible, until the day we find we cannot breathe. As we see and hear the grief, loss, trauma, and pain of children and their caregivers, we can become overwhelmed, numb, and drained.

Taking time for self-care is essential. How do we make it a priority? We have to create a self-care plan that includes strategies to prevent becoming overwhelmed as well as strategies to help us cope when we do become overwhelmed. This plan can be divided into three easy-to-remember ABCs: awareness, balance, and connection.

A is for Awareness

As a leader, you have probably learned quite a bit about trauma. You likely understand how traumatic experiences, particularly during childhood, change the brains of children and adults. You have probably become adept at learning to see beyond children's behaviors to the causes behind those behaviors. You may also be familiar with concepts related to historical and multi-generational trauma that may affect those in your group.

But have you taken the time to explore how all of this trauma affects you? It is helpful to know the

general warning signs of too much trauma exposure, as well as the specific signs that may apply to you.¹ Once you become aware of the warning signs, you can learn the strategies that work best for you to prevent overexposure, when possible, and to cope with STS.

“But wait,” you might say, “helping others gives me my sense of purpose. I don’t see it as a negative.” In fact, those studying STS and vicarious trauma have come to understand that on the other side of these challenges are equally compelling strengths that caring for and supporting others can enhance. For every negative term you might hear such as burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma, there are corresponding strengths, including increased capacity for empathy, resilience, and compassion satisfaction. So take heart, the STS you experience may also be serving to help you grow and build your skills that make you strong, confident, and successful in your role as leader. The key is to develop the awareness necessary to diminish the harmful impacts of STS while maximizing the benefits of helping others.

B is for Balance

Preventing burnout and coping with the other harmful impacts of STS requires a self-care plan that you are likely to follow. Great ideas that are too costly, time consuming, or inconvenient won’t be used. In determining what will work for you, it is important to consider balance across multiple life domains.

Make a list of a few things you can do every day to renew and refresh your own mind, body, and spirit.

For some people, this list includes such things as listening to music, doing a crossword puzzle, indulging in chocolate, or taking a walk. Then add a few things to your list that you do a little less often—perhaps a weekly hike with a friend or a date-night with your spouse or partner. Finally, add a couple of special occasion items to your list. These would be things you only do once or twice a year, but looking forward to them gives you strength and encouragement along the way. Such items could include a weekend get away, running a marathon, or attending a meaningful national conference.

Consider including activities that:

- Engage each of your five senses—sight, sound, scent, taste, touch
- Invigorate and stimulate your mind
- Nourish and move your body
- Refresh your spirit and restore your sense of purpose and hope
- Provide quiet time alone
- Nourish relationships and time with others

C is for Connection

Nurturing existing relationships is incredibly important, yet not all of our friends and family understand the unique challenges or special rewards we experience as parents of children with trauma histories. While the support groups we lead can be a source of our exposure to the trauma of others, these groups can also be part of our self-care plan and healing strategy. They provide opportunities for learning and practicing new skills or banding together to advocate for our children.

¹ For more information, please read *Symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress*, available at professionals.adoptuskids.org.

As humans, relationships are necessary for survival. Don't neglect yours! As a group leader, it is difficult to balance the leadership role with the role of a member in need of support. If family and friends have a hard time relating to our parenting journey, fewer still can relate to or understand the complex challenges we face as support group leaders. This is why it is vitally important for support group leaders to form our own networks and communities of support. Using a co-facilitation model can help in this regard, as well as belonging to in-person and online communities for group leaders, such as the Facebook page offered by the North American Council on Adoptable Children or the webinars provided by AdoptUSKids.

Stick with it

Once you have made your self-care plan, share it with your spouse, partner, or close friend so they can serve as an accountability buddy. Put it on the refrigerator, your bedroom mirror, or in the notes section or calendar of your phone. Without these reminders, you are least likely to remember your self-care strategies just when you need them most.

Think about how you will implement your self-care plan. Spread your daily activities throughout the day and into the evening and your less frequent activities across the week or year. Occasionally take time to share your self-care strategies with the members of your support group. When you make self-care a priority, you are also setting a good example for them as they learn to manage their own health and wellness.

Take a break

Don't forget, sometimes practicing self-care means taking a break from group leadership. Give yourself a week or two of respite while a co-facilitator takes charge, and step back into your leadership role when you are refreshed and ready to be fully engaged. Benefits of periodic respite include:

- Reduced stress and increased patience
- Enhanced coping skills
- Improved energy, and physical health
- Increased opportunity to gain perspective
- Strengthened relationships

Although often challenging to arrange, building respite into your life is essential. When you demonstrate this by stepping aside from your leadership role from time to time, your entire group is better served and you set an example for others to follow, while providing opportunities for up-and-coming leaders to their skills. When a group has a leader who attends to self-care and encourages members to regularly do so, the long-term vitality and sustainability of the group is enhanced.

Resources

Find more resources for parent group leaders at professionals.adoptuskids.org.

Tip sheets

- *4 Keys to Effective Meeting Facilitation for Support Group Leaders* (2019)
- *7 Characteristics of Successful Parent-Support Group Leaders* (2019)
- *Self-Care Activities for Your Group* (2019)
- *Symptoms of Secondary Traumatic Stress* (2019)

Recorded webinars

- *Effective Facilitation of Parent Support Groups* (2018)
- *Engaging Parents and Caregivers in Support Groups* (2018)
- *Peer Support Strategies for Kinship, Foster, and Adoptive Families in Tribal Communities* (2019)
- *Successful Peer Leadership of Parent Support Groups* (2019)

If you want help developing your support services for adoptive, foster, and kinship families, we can help. Contact us at consultation@adoptuskids.org.



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