



INTRODUCTION TO SECONDARY TRAUMA



Safe
Families



Home
for Good

THIS HANDBOOK WILL COVER

- What is secondary trauma?
- How does secondary trauma impact us?
- What can we do about it?



DEFINITIONS

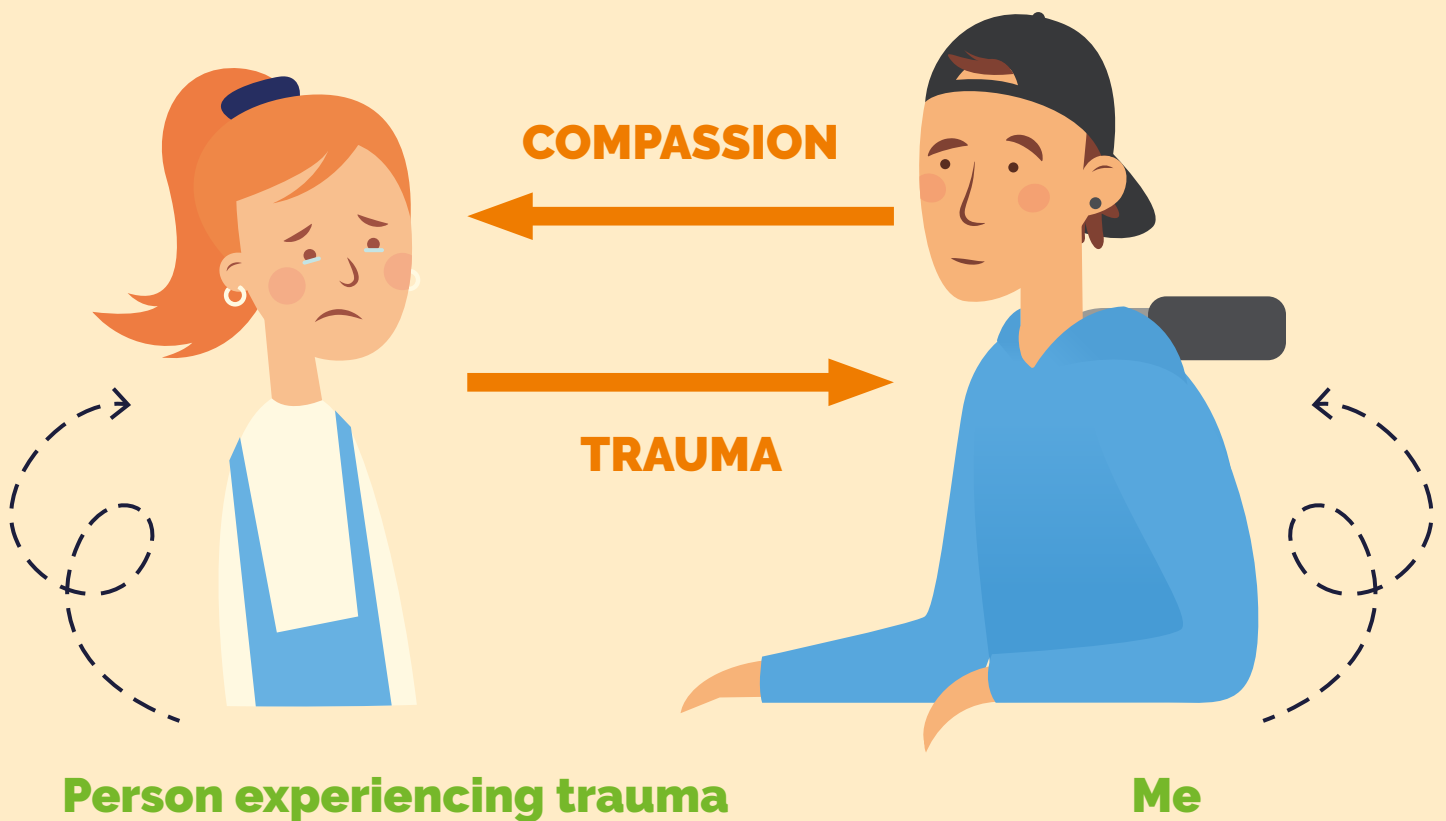
- **Stress:** Our internal response to a challenge.
- **Resilience:** The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties.
- **Dysregulation:** Poor ability to manage emotional responses.
- **Reason:** Our ability to think and problem solve.
- **Compassion:** Our ability to connect to one another.
- **Attachment:** The emotional bond between an infant and parent or caregiver

WHAT IS SECONDARY TRAUMA?

Secondary trauma is experienced indirectly through hearing details or witnessing the aftermath of trauma **experienced by another person**.

Those who work in **caring roles** (e.g. social workers, professional counsellors, first responders, and police officers) and the **loved ones** of trauma survivors are at a **greater risk** of experiencing secondary trauma.

SECONDARY TRAUMA AND COMPASSION



WHY DOES IT MATTER TO US?

Compassion opens you up to other people's trauma.

Other people's trauma can **impact us**, and it can result in secondary trauma.

Those who are most **effective** at working with traumatised children and families are **most vulnerable** to secondary trauma.



Why are those supporting vulnerable people more likely to experience secondary trauma?

Secondary trauma could impact anyone, especially if you are in a caring role or have a loved one who has experienced trauma.

Secondary trauma is the brain's stress response to witnessing or hearing about someone's firsthand trauma.

This response can sometimes be triggered by a deep **emotional connection** to the person suffering. Caring deeply about those who are experiencing traumatic events can cause feelings of helplessness and emotional exhaustion.



You may be vulnerable to secondary trauma when supporting someone who has experienced:

Sexual assault

Physical assault

Childhood abuse or neglect

Accidents

Near-death experiences

Natural disasters

Combat or war

Other contributing factors can include:

Frequent exposure to trauma

Relationships with people who frequently talk about their trauma

Personal history of trauma

Having a parent/carer with trauma

Having a child with trauma

Being overworked or having demanding shifts

Isolation

If we are **compassionate** people, we are more **vulnerable** to other people's trauma.

Psychologists now know that the very people who are especially good at **compassion and empathy** are most at risk of suffering from secondary trauma. Being moved to help people might make us more vulnerable to suffering **secondary trauma** and it's helpful to be aware of this.

NOTES:



Why are we vulnerable if we are compassionate?

In meeting the needs of someone with trauma, we must attune to them.

We show empathy and meet their needs through sensing, feeling and thinking - we physiologically change!

Our neural circuit for compassion links to our vagus nerve.



Emotions of Secondary Trauma

Anxiety

Stress

Fatigue

Sadness

THE AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM



Hypothalamus

At base of brain



Pituitary

Under the brain



Adrenals

Above kidneys

The Vagus Nerve



Connected to all the major organs



Responsible for the regulation of internal organ functions



Digestion, heart rate, respiratory rate, reflex actions



What does healthy vagal tone look like?

Calm and peaceful mind

Positive mood

Good digestion and bowel movements

Healthy blood sugar and body weight

Healthy pulse rate and blood pressure

Normal speech and swallowing ability

Ways we can lose vagal tone

Isolation

Trauma

Lack of sleep

Sensory overwhelm

Emotional stress

Some medical conditions

Age


Gut issues

Lack of movement

Overwhelm

Physical stress

Overuse of screens

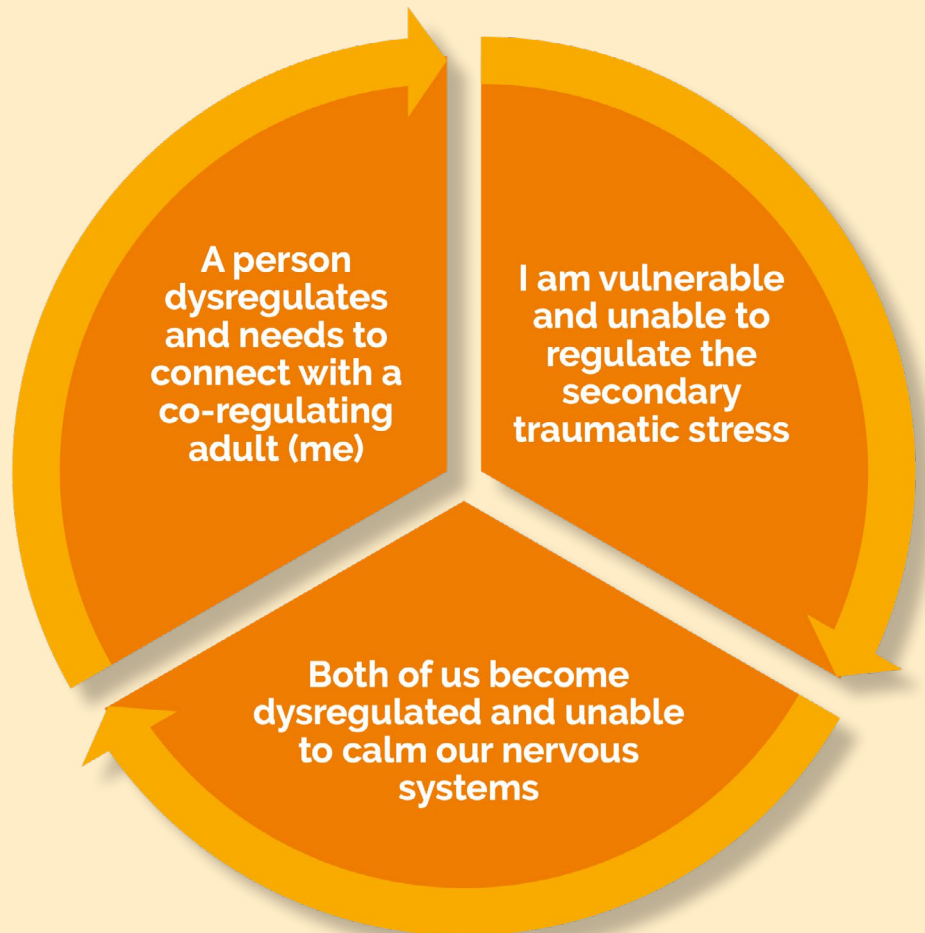
A stylized illustration of a person's face and shoulder, rendered in a flat, modern style. The face is dark brown with a small, curved line for a smile and a single dot for an eye. The shoulder is a solid orange color. The illustration is positioned on the right edge of the page, partially cut off.



How does it affect us?

1. When we are resilient, we strengthen our vagus nerve.
2. When we are vulnerable, our vagus nerve can become overwhelmed by stress or depleted, it affects our ability for compassion, and we can become dysregulated.
3. The strength of our vagus nerve impacts how we experience other people's trauma.

The cycle of secondary trauma



TRAUMA RESPONSES



SOCIAL

**Avoidance
Withdrawal
Relationship
problems**



PHYSICAL

Eating Sleeping Illness



INTELLECTUAL

Memory
Concentration
Attention span



EMOTIONAL

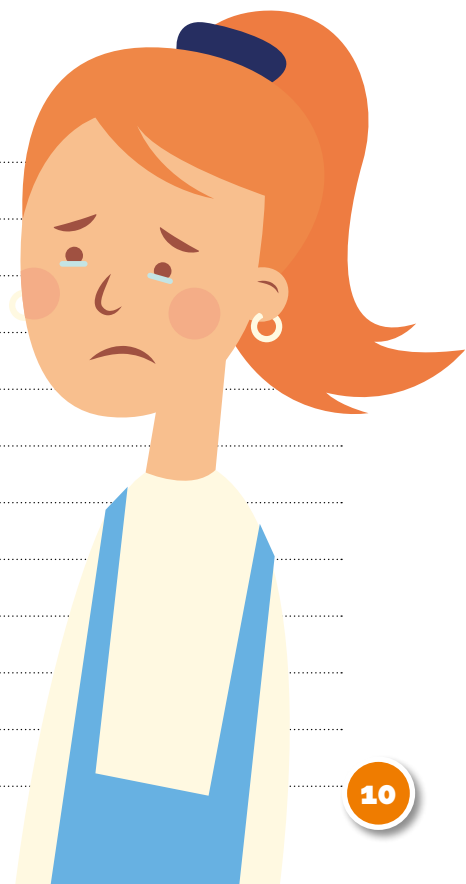
Angry
Anxious
Controlling



SPIRITUAL

Anger and cynicism
Guilt
Fear

What are the signs of secondary trauma you can look for in yourself and others?



THE IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS

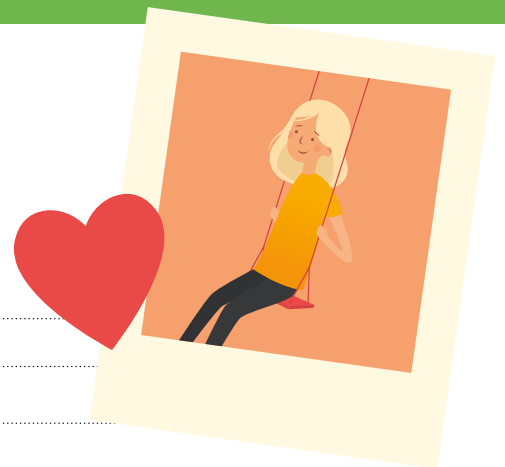
People...

- Withdraw from each other
- Fail to appreciate others
- Become impatient
- Increase in conflict
- Have poor communication
- May spend more time working in isolation



Time-out

Make sure you take time to look after yourself while you are considering these things...



THERE ARE KEY FACTORS TO MANAGING SECONDARY TRAUMA

Understanding

Support Network

Relationships

Self-care



KEEPING A BALANCE

Keeping a balance in life is one of the ways we can strengthen vagal tone. Why don't you create your own SPIES chart and revisit it in a months' time? Maybe you will have created a better balance!

The size of your segment will reflect its importance to you.

Ideally all five segments should be the same size and balanced.

Is there anything you can do to strengthen your resilience?

What could you do differently that may change things for you?

What practices could you put into place to balance your segments?





“Self-care is never a selfish act - it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others. Anytime we can listen to true self and give the care it requires, we do it not only for ourselves, but for the many others whose lives we touch.”

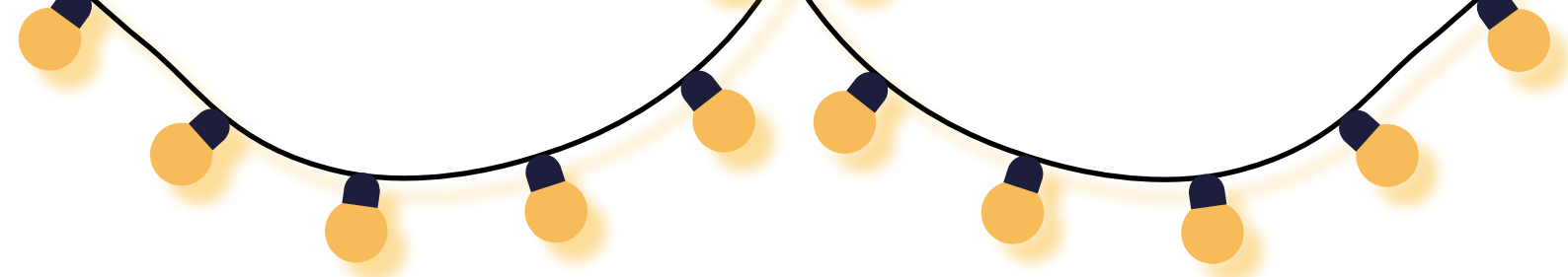
Parker J Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*



Notes

A series of horizontal dotted lines for taking notes, spanning the width of the page below the 'Notes' header.





What are the things you can do to practice self-care?

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BUILDING RESILIENCE



Building resilience can help improve your vagal tone.

Consider the things in your life that build you up and bring you down.

Jot them down on the graphic below and review it occasionally so that you are putting things in your life that build your resilience.

Use the two arrows to write things that lower and build your resilience.

What lowers your resilience?

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What builds your resilience?

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COMPASSIONATE REASON

'Compassionate reason is the ability to both understand and respond to another's suffering.'

SELF-REFLECTION

'The activity of thinking about your own feelings and behaviour, and the reasons that may lie behind them.'

REFLECTION AND COMPASSIONATE REASON



Control what we can change.

Observe what we can't change with curiosity, compassion and acceptance.

Regulating our emotions whilst holding appropriate boundaries.



BEING REFLECTIVE

Checking in with ourselves on a regular basis to make sure we are able to be reflective, is one way to help us **build resilience**.

If you find yourself **reacting**, it is time to take a **pause**, take some time out and practice **self-care**.



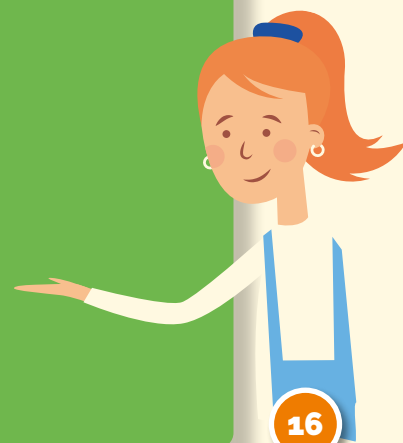
REACTION VS REFLECTION

REACTION

- No thinking time
- No planning
- Rapid decision making
- Crisis management
- Focus on individual - behaviour and tasks

REFLECTION

- Thinking
- Observing
- Planning
- Anticipating
- Focus on relationship - feelings and process



PREVENTION AND RECOVERY:

Connection
with others

Honesty

Teamwork

Self-care

Building
vagal tone

Gratitude

Clear
boundaries

Realistic
approach

Building
resilience

Balance

Noticing
signs

Faith

Add some more ideas below



“What’s the bravest thing you’ve ever asked?” said the boy.

“Help,” said the horse.

Charlie Mackesy, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse*

An illustration of three people from the chest up, positioned on the right side of the page. From left to right: a Black man with short dark hair, wearing a white lab coat over a teal shirt, with a stethoscope around his neck; a white man with short brown hair, wearing an orange sweater; and a white woman with short brown hair, wearing a blue shirt. All three are smiling and looking towards the right. The background of the entire page is white with horizontal dotted lines.

OTHER TRAINING:



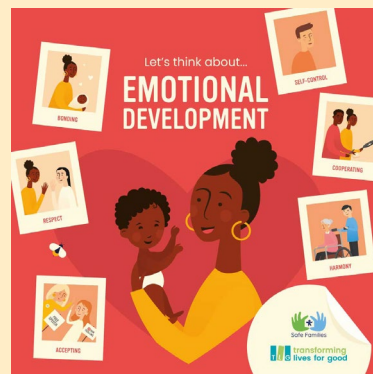
- Mental Health Awareness
- Understanding Young People
- Autism Awareness Training
- Risks Outside the Home
- Introduction to Therapeutic Parenting
- Introduction to Trauma-Informed Support

FIND OUT MORE



safefamilies.uk/training

RESOURCES



HELPLINES:

MIND HELPLINE

Call **0300 123 3393**

(9am - 6pm weekdays except bank holidays)

SAMARITANS

Call **116 123**

(24 hours a day)

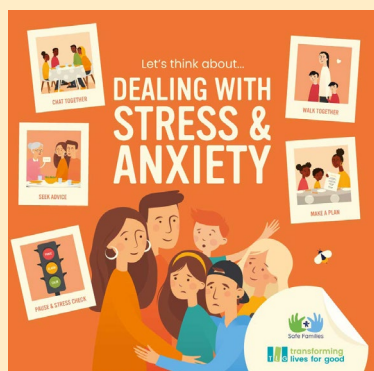
CALM

Call **0800 58 58 58**

(5pm - midnight)



More information and support can be found in our booklets made in partnership with TLG. Booklets can be accessed via their website.



FIND OUT MORE



[tlg.org.uk/get-involved/
tlg-resource-shop](https://tlg.org.uk/get-involved/tlg-resource-shop)



safefamilies.uk | homeforgood.org.uk

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