

How to Identify and Address Secondary Trauma

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Pro bono projects can provide some of the most meaningful and interesting moments in a lawyer's career. It's usually an easy decision to say "yes" when presented with a pro bono opportunity, because this type of work gives young lawyers invaluable experience and offers all lawyers a purposeful way to give back to their communities. Unfortunately, at the same time this work can be incredibly stressful, challenging, and emotionally taxing, and may lead to secondary trauma.

Secondary trauma is when the stress of working with a trauma-exposed client begins to interfere with a pro bono lawyer's professional or personal life. Secondary traumatic stress, also known as vicarious trauma, burnout, or compassion fatigue, shares some symptoms with post-traumatic stress disorder, but it is the product of being indirectly exposed to another's trauma. Examples of secondary trauma have been found in social workers who work with abused children; and therapists who support sexual assault survivors. Secondary traumatic stress also affects public interest lawyers, and has been documented among [public defenders](#) and [judges](#).

According to the [American Bar Association](#), lawyers in practice areas such as criminal, family, and juvenile law are particularly susceptible to secondary traumatic stress, as their work often requires them to listen to victims' personal stories and review evidence of traumatic events. Likewise, lawyers working on pro bono cases for clients who have survived extremely traumatic events may also be vulnerable to the effects of secondary trauma, particularly when asked to read, view, or listen to graphic depictions of violence.

Identifying Symptoms of Secondary Trauma

It is important to look for [symptoms of secondary traumatic stress](#) in your colleagues and within yourself.

In the workplace, compassion fatigue may manifest as:

- avoidance (such as avoiding clients or missing deadlines);

- hypervigilance (feeling on edge or like all clients are in immediate danger);
- becoming argumentative or defensive about work on a case, frequently spending large amounts of time on a pro bono case outside of regular work hours, and generally becoming less productive and effective;

In your personal life, it may show-up as:

- disturbing images from cases appearing in dreams or intrusive thoughts;
- physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches, feeling tired or guilty all of the time;
- becoming numb and detached from your friends or family outside of the office.

Tools and Resources

As a busy professional, who is deeply committed to your work on a case, how do you assess your stress? Simply acknowledging and naming what you are experiencing can be an important first step in combatting secondary traumatic stress. One tool to help you examine if your work is taking a toll on your mental health is the Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQOL) Measure, available [online](#), which evaluates an individual's compassion satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress on separate scales.

If you determine you are experiencing burnout or compassion fatigue, it is critical that you find time to be away from your work (and your phone). Erika Tullberg, an expert on secondary trauma and assistant professor at New York University, [recommends](#) establishing regular, defined breaks where you do not check your emails or texts. She suggests telling colleagues that you will be away from your texts/emails for a set amount of time (say, an hour or two in the evening) and to call only if it is an emergency. It can also be helpful to discuss both the positive or rewarding aspects of pro bono work, as well as the stress you may be experiencing, with a colleague who has worked on similar cases in the past, a supervisor on the case, or the head of the pro bono program.

Lawyers may also be able to take advantage of programs offered by their firm to help them cope with secondary trauma. At Proskauer, for example, there is an employee assistance program that includes, among many things, access to confidential counseling sessions. A firm can also help by placing an emphasis on mentoring and guidance from experienced lawyers, and by being willing to assign additional resources to particular matters. Finally, if stress or burnout reaches a point where it is significantly impacting a lawyer's personal relationships and ability to perform professionally, consider finding help from a licensed mental health professional, who can provide personal guidance and tailored resources.

Please seek care if you recognize the symptoms of compassion fatigue in yourself or a colleague.

Additional resources include:

- [Living Above the Bar's Mental Health Resource Page](#) on burnout and secondary trauma for lawyers, curated by the Attorney Wellness Task Force of the South Carolina Bar.
- [The American Bar Association Guide for Lawyers Working with Child Victims](#), which includes applicable self-help recommendations and firm best practices for lawyers experiencing secondary traumatic stress.
- [The Trauma Informed Law Resource Page](#), which includes self-care tips for lawyers as well as information on trauma-informed legal practice.

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