

## EDUCATOR SELF-CARE

*“Schools and school systems must provide the space necessary for educators to take care of themselves — or risk losing them.” Jolon McNeil, an educator*

Any educator who works directly with traumatized children and adolescents is vulnerable to feelings of anxiety and emotional distress, becoming mentally and emotionally worn out, and feeling overwhelmed by students’ traumas. These feelings and experiences are called compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious traumatization. These reactions are not signs of weakness, they are the cost of caring about and for those more vulnerable than ourselves.

Knowledge and self-awareness to enable early recognition of distress and implementation of self-care strategies are the keys to maintaining the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical health that enables educators to be present and fully engaged in meeting students’ needs.

These research-to-practice briefs are dedicated to facilitating making educator self-care an intentional aspect of professional development.

### Understanding Burnout, Vicarious Trauma, Secondary Traumatic Stress, and Compassion Fatigue

Have you considered leaving your job because it feels overwhelming? Are you becoming less motivated to push through the challenges you face in the classroom? Do you feel like you have little control over your students’ in the classroom because of other factors that impact them?

Although teaching has many challenges, it is also rewarding. Some days you leave work feeling successful and that you made a difference in a child’s life. On other days, you may question whether you have done enough because no matter what you do and how effective you teach you cannot control the way children will respond.

Teachers working with children who have been or are impacted by trauma are at risk of developing short and long-term negative stress responses that may affect their work or life overall. Due to the emotional nature of this work, teachers may experience, vicarious traumatization, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and professional burnout.

#### Compassion Fatigue

Compassion fatigue is emotional and physical fatigue that professionals may experience from

the stress of working with people who have experienced trauma and suffering.

Compassion fatigue often builds up over time while vicarious trauma and secondary trauma may develop more immediately. Each condition may manifest if teachers are not equipped with effective coping strategies.

Maintaining your emotional health is essential when caring for youth impacted by trauma. You cannot support someone else until you support yourself first.

### **Secondary Traumatic Stress and Vicarious Trauma**

Secondary traumatic stress is the result of bearing witness (directly or indirectly) to someone's trauma. It can manifest in outward behaviors like post-traumatic stress disorder. One may experience intrusive thoughts, memories or nightmares related to students' experience with trauma, insomnia, irritability, and angry outbursts.

Vicarious trauma is a process of cognitive change that occurs from working with people who have experienced trauma. Symptoms may include: a change in one's sense of self, world view about safety, trust and control, and changes in spiritual beliefs.

Both vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress can occur as a result of direct practice with or exposure to people who have experienced trauma. They can be independent from each other or happen at the same time.

### **Professional Burnout**

#### **Adapted from:**

Lucas, L. (2007). The Pain of Attachment: "You Have to Put a Little Wedge in There" How Vicarious Trauma Affects Child/Teacher Attachment. *Childhood Education*, 84(2), 85-91

Newell, J. M., & MacNeil, G. A. (2010). Professional burnout, vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue. *Best Practices in Mental Health*, 6(2), 57-68.

Burnout is a state of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual exhaustion that occurs over time, and is impacted by the population one serves and the organization one works for. Human service work is the largest risk factor for developing burnout.

The three domains of burnout include: *Emotional exhaustion*, a state in which you may feel emotionally drained by the high demands of

“Remember, what you’re doing for them [the children] is all that you can do. Just do your best and remember that you’ll have to come home and take care of yourself too.”-

Lyn Lucas

your work. *Depersonalization*, which refers to negative responses and detachment from coworkers or student. *Reduced sense of personal accomplishment*, which refers to the feeling that no matter what you do, your work is insufficient because you don't see changes in your students.

Future briefs will detail ways of recognizing when you are experiencing distress and active coping steps that you can engage.