



## Well@Work Podcast

### Episode 11: Using your EAP for Secondary Traumatic Stress

Welcome to the Well@Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is being brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode of the podcast, Dr. Jessica Eslinger discusses how utilizing an employee assistance program can help with symptoms of secondary traumatic stress. And now, Dr. Jessica Eslinger.

Hello, my name is Dr. Jessica Eslinger, and I'm a clinician and researcher at the University of Kentucky's Center on Trauma and Children. In this podcast, I'm going to talk with you about utilizing your organization's employee assistance program, also known as an EAP, as a helpful first step in getting support when you're experiencing symptoms of secondary traumatic stress, also called STS, that are interfering with your work or personal functioning. As awareness of STS has increased, organizations are developing ways to help mitigate these symptoms by developing policies and practices that address STS. There will be times however, when an individual employee may develop symptoms of STS regardless of what an organization does because of the realities of our work. We know that STS is an occupational hazard for those of us who are exposed to traumatic content when working with others; this could include hearing trauma stories, seeing the physical effects of violence, or having to repeat these stories as part of our professional duties. We can be well trained and great at our jobs and develop symptoms of STS that make it difficult for us to function personally and professionally. Currently, this risk is further enhanced by our experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to new stressors and challenges. When symptoms of STS begin to interfere with our daily lives and our ability to do our jobs, it is time to seek help from a mental health professional. EAPs are offered by many organizations as a part of their benefit package and can be a good place to start to help employees get connected to the right resources.

Let's consider Mary. Mary has worked as a hospital social worker for seven years, she is interfacing with family members who are frustrated they cannot be with their critically ill or dying loved ones and is trying to provide support to those who are suffering alone. These exposures to suffering and loss are not new for Mary, but since the COVID pandemic, she has had little access to supervision and peer support and she has experienced a lot of anxiety related to coming to work and managing her exposure to the virus. She's not sleeping well, finds herself overreacting to slight irritations, and is wanting to avoid her work because she feels like she just cannot take it anymore. Mary is wondering if she needs to talk to a professional.

Here are four tips for helping you determine if utilizing your EAP might be helpful. First, you feel hopeless and cynical about your work. Secondly, you feel that you're avoiding work responsibilities, including contact with your clients. Third, you're having difficulty thinking through options and making decisions in more complex work-related situations. Fourth, your supervisor or other colleagues have voiced concern about how you're doing. If you believe that you could benefit from utilizing your EAP, you can reach out to your organization's human resources to find out if an EAP is available, and how to access this resource. If your organization does not have an EAP, mental health services may be covered by your insurance. You can contact your insurance company for providers in your area.

Once you get to the external provider or EAP professional, here are some questions to ask. What is the clinician's educational background? The EAP clinician will need to have a master's or doctoral



degree in social work, psychology, or a related field and be either independently licensed or under supervision for licensure. Has the clinician receive formal training on trauma and STS? Specific areas of knowledge about STS should include assessment of both PTSD and STS symptoms, the prevalence of STS for providers working in helping professions, and the potential interplay among social, cultural, historical, psychological, and neurobiological factors on the severity of symptoms and functional impairment. Lastly, is the clinician trained in any trauma-focused evidence-based treatments? Examples of such treatments include cognitive processing therapy, prolonged exposure, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy. While these interventions may not be utilized during the EAP sessions to address STS, training in these trauma-focused interventions can be a helpful knowledge base for intervening with STS. Thanks for watching this podcast, I hope it has helped raise your awareness of how you can utilize your EAP. For more information on the symptoms of secondary traumatic stress, please watch our Well@Work podcast on STS.

Thank you for listening to this episode of the podcast, follow the link in the video description for more resources on our Well@Work website. And of course, stay tuned for more episodes on topics that will keep you well at work.