

Well@Work Podcast

Episode 5: Supervision: How supervisors can combat 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 to the Department of Behavioral Health. On this episode of the podcast, Allison Hendricks, a licensed clinical social worker, discusses how supervision tools can help combat secondary traumatic stress. And now, Allison Hendricks.

Hi, my name is Alison Hendricks, and I'm a licensed clinical social worker who specializes in trauma-informed care and secondary traumatic stress. This podcast focuses on how supervisors can support employees that may be suffering from symptoms of secondary traumatic stress. As Dr. Sprang explained in the first podcast in this series, secondary traumatic stress or STS is an occupational hazard that impacts many professionals working with individuals who've experienced trauma. Professionals who are exposed to trauma in their work may experience a wide range of symptoms and reactions ranging from mild to severe, in which case they may even develop post-traumatic stress disorder. There's growing awareness that STS is a problem that needs to be addressed, but what do we do about it?

A key component to addressing STS is providing support to those professionals who are on the front lines. Supervisors play a vital role in this. In many settings, supervisors meet with their staff regularly in individual and/or group supervision to provide guidance and support. The problem is that supervisors are rarely trained in STS and many feel ill-equipped to support staff who are suffering from trauma exposure reactions. Many supervisors want to help their supervisees with STS, but do not know how. Supervisors also have to answer to administrators and often feel pressure from above to make sure agency staff are meeting the goals and requirements of the organization. This can create conflict for supervisors when they see that agency demands and high trauma exposure are causing distress in their workers. Supervisors also experience their own STS related to being exposed to the trauma of the cases they supervised, being responsible for case outcomes, and past trauma exposure from previous work experiences. Supervisors may not have access to appropriate supports to help them manage all this.

Let's consider the case of Rita, who is a supervisor in a behavioral health organization. Rita was a front-line clinician for 10 years and was promoted to supervisor with little training on how to supervise and no training in STS. Rita supervises a team of clinicians who are exposed to graphic details of horrific trauma. Rita still feels upset when she thinks about some of her most difficult cases. Her team has a high caseload of severe trauma cases, which has been dealing with the uncertainties of COVID-19 as well. Rita sees that many of her supervisees are distressed, exhausted, and struggling to complete their work. She wants to help them, but is also feeling pressure from management to meet deadlines. She has little contact with other supervisors and her monthly supervision with her manager is strictly administrative. Rita has been feeling isolated, sad, angry, and inadequate.

So, what can Rita do? Tip number one: many supervisors like Rita are dealing with their own STS and wanting to support staff, but lacking the knowledge and tools to do so. Fortunately, the Secondary Traumatic Stress Collaborative Group of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network created the core competencies for secondary trauma informed supervision. This resource includes nine core competencies for becoming an STS informed supervisor. This includes awareness of supervisor's own



STS, helping supervisees learn coping skills to manage their reactions to trauma exposure, and specific skills for emotional regulation and reflective processing. Each competency includes a list of specific supervisory practices that demonstrate the competency and some resources to support learning, so supervisors know what to do and how to do it.

Tip number two: do a self-assessment to determine your training needs as a supervisor. There is an STS core competency self-rating tool that gives supervisors a way to determine areas for additional learning and managers a way to assess the training needs of their supervisory staff. It is also a good way to assess your development as an STS informed supervisor over time. A copy of the STS core competencies and the self-rating tool can be found at this web address. Tip number three: check out our resources. The University of Kentucky STS Innovations and Solutions Center has additional resources to help supervisors, including additional training tools and aids. You can access these resources at the website below. So hang in there, readers of the world. There are tools out there to help you and more tools and resources are on the way. For more information and resources for supervisors, go to uky.edu/CTAC/Well@Work.

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.