



Well@Work Podcast

Season 4, Episode 5

How Supervisors can Combat Secondary Traumatic Stress

Welcome to the Well at Work podcast from the University of Kentucky Center on Trauma and Children. This podcast is brought to you by a grant from SAMHSA. On this episode, Dr Stephanie Gusler discusses ways supervisors can combat secondary traumatic stress.

There is growing awareness that secondary traumatic stress, or 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 don't 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 supervise, 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 of this.

Let's consider the case of Rita, who's a supervisor in a Behavioral Health Organization. Rita was a frontline clinician for 10 years and was promoted to supervisor with little training on how to supervise and no training in STS. Rita still feels upset when she thinks about some of her most difficult cases. She supervises a team of clinicians who have high case loads involving severe trauma due to being currently understaffed. 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 and productivity requirements. 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: take steps to assess and address your own STS reactions so that you will be better able to support your staff. You can check out the self-scoring secondary traumatic stress scale at the link below, which also recommends resources based on your own reported level of STS.

Tip number two: do a self assessment to determine your training needs as a supervisor. 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 core competencies for becoming an STS informed supervisor. This includes helping supervisors learn coping skills to manage their reactions to trauma exposure and specific skills for emotion regulation and enhancing supervisors resilience. 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. There are two versions of this resource that are available: one geared towards mental or behavioral health supervisors, and one intended for multi-disciplinary supervisors. Both versions have an accompanying 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. These self-rating tools can also be used to assess your own development as an STS-informed supervisor over time. A copy of both versions of the STS core competencies with the corresponding self-rating tools can be found on our Website.

Tip number three: check out our resources. The University of Kentucky STS Innovations and Solutions Center has additional resources to help supervisors, including an implementation guide for the STS supervisory competencies and additional training tools and aids. So hang in there, Ritas of the world, there are tools out there to help you, and more resources are on the way. Check out all the links in the video description to get started, and remember to stay well at work.