

Presentation Format: Oral Presentation

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Title: Secondary Traumatic Stress: Strategies for Prevention and Resilience in Social Work Education

Abstract: In today's socio-ecological climate, social workers are challenged more than ever before to advance social and economic justice, and increase human well-being and resilience in individuals and societies who are experiencing heightened distress, increased trauma-exposure, and access to limited resources. Trauma exposure such as natural disasters, poverty, combat, accidents, and various forms of interpersonal violence have been reported by more than 20 countries, of which 3.5% of the total population reported Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (World Health Organization, 2013). Social Workers across the world are exposed to various forms of trauma and human suffering through their work and therefore, are secondarily exposed to these traumatic events.

Social workers who work with people, who have experienced trauma, report a range of negative effects associated with indirect or secondary exposure to the traumatic experiences of those they serve. These secondary traumatic stress (STS) effects in workers have been well documented in the literature (e.g., Cohen & Collens, 2013; Pearlman, 2003; Pearlman & Mac Ian, 1995; Pryce, Shackelford, & Pryce, 2007; Steed & Bicknell, 2001). Over time, STS may interfere with social workers' ability to provide effective services, and negatively affect their personal well-being, physical and mental health, interpersonal relationships, and worldview. When social workers experience extreme negative STS effects they are at risk of providing ineffective services and may ultimately leave the profession.

Social work students are particularly at risk to develop STS effects when they are exposed to trauma-related material (e.g., readings, videos) in the classroom (Adams & Riggs, 2008; Carello & Butler, 2014; Courtois & Gold, 2009), in field settings, and in their work. If the early symptoms of STS are recognized and effective strategies are utilized, these symptoms may be reduced, therefore prevent the development of more chronic negative effects, such as those found in vicarious traumatization.

This oral presentation will discuss literature regarding STS in social workers and in social work students, and provide a forum for discussion of implications for social work education. Best practices to advance the level of preparedness for social work students to provide effective trauma-focused treatment while preventing or reducing secondary traumatic stress and enhancing resilience will also be discussed.

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