

System Drivers of Compassion Fatigue

Section 4



For Toolkit Facilitators and Leadership Team Only:

The following is a review of system factors that lead to compassion fatigue and those that are protective. Keep these factors in mind as you facilitate the combined staff and leadership activity below, What Can I Control?, and if you are on the leadership team, use this information to prepare and respond to the activity.

These are summarized from the research reported in: *Advances in School Mental Health Promotion*; Caringi et. all: *Secondary traumatic stress in public school teachers: contributing and mitigating factors*. Jan 2012.

Educators are at risk for compassion fatigue through their continued exposure to the students' trauma narratives as well as to burnout due to the organizational stress inherent in an educational system. The effects of stress and trauma exposure are increasingly viewed as an 'occupational hazard' in the field of education. Younger professionals (fewer years in the field) are more at risk to the negative impact of stress. Of the educators interviewed for this research, 75% had thoughts of changing careers, moving to a different school settings, or retiring... all due to work-related stress.

Types of System Stress

Colleague Stress: Educators report stress when needing to work with peers regarding – lack of professional commitment, lack of experience with the students who may have difficult behaviors, inconsistency in dealing with disciplinary issues, inconsistency in applying rules, and feeling 'excluded from group and community decisions' within the school.

Organization Stress: Over 80% of identified educator stress relates to organizational characteristics, such as class load size, school environment management, lack of productive supervision, role overload, long hours, no planning time, and dealing with behavioral conflicts. Many of these are areas that educators typically have little control over.

More on Class Size: Larger class sizes were described as difficult: difficult to build connections with students, student behavior is negatively affected, limited ability to effectively cover all educational material, increased time dedicated to managing student behaviors. Smaller classrooms give educators the flexibility to provide individuals with more attention (academically and behaviorally).

Community Stress: (added by toolkit authors) The systems schools turn to in hopes of linking students and families to needed services often are unable to deliver high quality, timely services due to their own systemic barriers and large scale events that simultaneously impact the majority of a community such as community violence, social discrimination, natural disasters, unemployment, etc., which are events that can affect them personally, as well as the students and families with whom they work.

Protective Factors Impacted by Effective Leadership Practices

Sense of Competence: Feeling successful with students and having more control of the classroom decisions. (This will also be addressed in Section 8 of the Toolkit – Mind)

Educator Support Systems: Educators identify other educators as their primary source of support, yet none felt comfortable admitting stress or difficulties to administration. Social support is among the strongest mitigating factors against secondary trauma. The simple act of having time to discuss work-related stress with colleagues is most effective in reducing symptoms. Social support has been shown to buffer a myriad of stress outcomes and is among the first line of intervention recommendations. (This will also be addressed in Section 11 of the Toolkit– Heart)

Supervision: Putting emphasis on supporting educators and helping them meet their needs with specific recommendations is most the effective supervision (especially related to new educators). Set aside some supervision time to build an individual self-care plan that can be monitored for progress over a length of time. Effective supervision that goes beyond focusing on administrative tasks, can contribute to positive outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and educator retention. Educators with high levels of STS benefit from a more intense tier of mentorship or perhaps individualized treatment provided by an outside agency resource (EAP).

Creating a Climate of Support: Creating a climate of support for stress and STS mitigation that is flexible and responsive to staff cultural diversity prevents hierarchical mechanisms that ultimately contribute to STS levels. It is recommended that institutional mechanisms for peer-to-peer discussion and consultation on work-related stress would support prevention and mitigation of stress and STS in the educational setting. (This will also be addressed in Section 7 of the Toolkit- Contract for Positive Staff Culture.)

Recommendations:

Based on the PBIS model, future school-based initiatives to address stress and STS would benefit from developing programs according to a collaborative, team-based approach. Specifically, three levels of intervention are recommended: Universal (Tier I) for all educators (especially newer), Secondary (Tier II) for those impacted by stress and STS at moderate levels, and Tertiary (Tier III) for those with the most extreme levels of STS. (The Compassion Resilience Toolkit is design for tier one and two interventions.)

Tier I: Interventions may include education on compassion fatigue and its correlates, as well as an introduction to self-care and system supports. There should also be education for administration on the impact of organizational stress, compassion fatigue, and encouraging their staff members to speak openly about the difficulties that they may be having related to their work-related stress and actions to become compassion resilient.

Tier II: Interventions may include more structured opportunities to discuss work-related stress with coworkers, in order to buffer against some of the specific negative effects of compassion fatigue in the school. These may include the development of 'personal,' 'professional,' and 'organizational' plans to build compassion resilience.

Tier III: Interventions may include providing referral sources and encouragement to seek a health care professional, take time off of work, and other personal means to get well. Included should be addressing the importance of supervision at the organizational, professional, and personal levels. Renewal and recovery is possible.