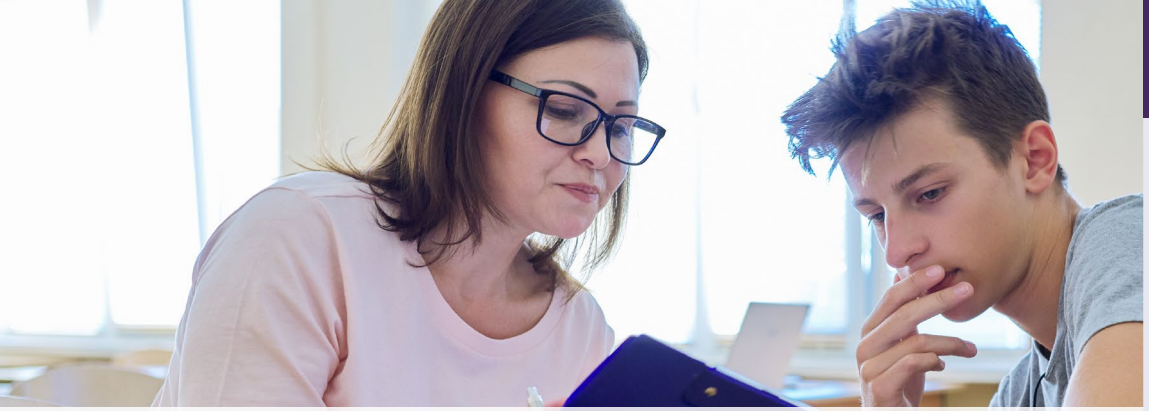

Secondary Traumatic Stress Reflection Check

NEW YORK STATE | Office of Mental Health

New York State Trauma-Informed Network & Resource Center

ABOUT THIS TOOL

Audience
Therapists, case managers, counselors, outreach staff, nonprofit and social service providers

Description
This brief, structured self-assessment tool helps to identify and process emotional weight carried from client interactions and exposure to trauma.

When to Use

- At the end of the workday to process emotional carryover
- After a particularly difficult client interaction or crisis
- When noticing signs of irritability, numbness, or rumination
- As part of regular wellness or burnout-prevention routines

WORKPLACE STRESS

Human and community service workers are routinely exposed to:

- Client trauma narratives and crisis situations
- Chronic exposure to systemic inequities and unmet needs
- High emotional labor and relational demands
- Responsibility ambiguity (feeling accountable for outcomes beyond control)
- Caseload pressure and limited resources

Over time, workers may begin to carry pieces of those experiences with them. This is called secondary traumatic stress.

This tool helps interrupt carrying emotions, build awareness, and reinforce healthy mental and emotional boundaries.

THE PRACTICE

Step 1

Quick Reflection

Take about one minute and check the statements that feel true today.

☐ I keep thinking about a client's situation after work
☐ I feel emotionally drained or numb
☐ I'm more irritable or impatient than usual
☐ I'm having trouble sleeping or relaxing after work
☐ I feel responsible for fixing problems that I cannot actually control
☐ I'm avoiding certain clients or conversations because they feel overwhelming

If you checked three or more, your stress system may be carrying more than it can easily process right now.

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THE PRACTICE

Step 2

Name the Weight

Write down one situation that is staying with you today.

Examples might include:

- A client's story
- A difficult conversation
- A crisis situation

What happened?

_____

_____

_____

What part of this situation feels the heaviest?

_____

_____

_____

Step 3

Reclaim Perspective

Ask yourself:

What part of this situation was within my control?

_____

_____

_____

What part was not my responsibility to fix?

_____

_____

_____

Step 4

Release

Take three slow breaths.

Finish this sentence: *I did what I could today by...*

WHY THIS HELPS

Human and community services workers often don't know the outcome or impact of their work. Taking time to acknowledge the effort you made reminds you that you are making a difference and that your work matters to those you serve.

Human service workers also regularly face emotionally intense situations that can leave the mind spinning and the body tense long after the moment has passed. This tool provides a quick, accessible way to step back, release that immediate tension, and return to the next interaction feeling calmer, clearer, and more present, rather than carrying the weight of one situation into the next.

WHY THIS WORKS

The emotional demands of human service work keep the nervous system in a near constant state of high alert, and without a deliberate release that stress accumulates fast. This tool works by interrupting that stress response — slowing the body down, redirecting focus, and signaling the brain that it is safe to settle — so workers can reset quickly and return to their duties with steadier emotions, sharper thinking, and a greater sense of control.

Resources:
Find additional wellness information on the NYS Trauma Informed Network and Resource Center at traumainformedny.org
Looking to go deeper?
Explore BREATH-BODY-MIND™ (BBM) for weekly breathwork practice, expert tips, and a welcoming community. Check out the website here for additional details.

Sources:
This tool was informed by research on secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma among helping professionals, including the work of Figley (1995) and later studies on secondary trauma in social service and healthcare settings.

Figley, C. R. (1995). Compassion fatigue: *Coping with secondary traumatic stress disorder in those who treat the traumatized.* Brunner/Mazel.