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The Cost of Caring: Secondary Traumatic Stress

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Introduction

Foster Parents work daily, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with children who have been traumatized. They listen to their stories and feel their hurt. Empathy is often the most important tool foster parents bring to helping the children in their care. Unfortunately, the more empathic they are the greater their risk for internalizing the trauma of their foster children. The result of this engagement is *secondary traumatic stress*.

What is secondary traumatic stress? How is it the same and/or different from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

According to Dr. Charles Figley, author of *Compassion Fatigue, Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder*, secondary traumatic stress is "the natural consequent behaviors resulting from knowledge about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other. It is the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person". Until recently, when we spoke about persons being traumatized we were speaking only of those people who were directly exposed to the trauma. We referred to their condition as post-traumatic stress disorder. Examples of such persons were Vietnam War veterans and/or victims of domestic violence.

In the last 15 years, we have come to recognize that people, who work with, listen to and try and help children and adults who have been traumatized are at risk for internalizing their trauma. This condition is called secondary traumatic stress. The only difference between post-traumatic stress disorder and secondary trauma is that with secondary trauma you are "a step away" from the trauma. The symptoms of primary or secondary trauma can be exactly the same!

*"The expectation that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet."**

*(Rachel Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*)

Why are foster parents at risk for developing secondary traumatic stress?

There are several reasons why foster parents are at risk for developing secondary trauma. Listed below are just a few of those reasons.

1) Empathy: Empathy is a valuable tool used by foster parents who work with traumatized children. Children get better in a foster home, not because their foster parents talk at them or tell them what to do, but because they are emotionally there for them. However, by empathizing with a child or "feeling their pain" the foster parent becomes vulnerable to internalizing the child's trauma-related pain.

2) Insufficient Recovery Time: Foster parents often listen to their foster children describe some pretty horrific events they have experienced. In addition, foster parents often listen to the same or similar horror stories over and over again. With children in their home 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, foster parents are often deprived of the "time off" they need to heal or to get some distance from what they have heard. These small stresses are cumulative and can, over time, have a negative effect on even the most compassionate and resilient foster parents.

3) Unresolved Personal Trauma: Many foster parents have had some personal loss or even traumatic experience in their own life (e.g., loss of a family member, death of a close friend, physical or emotional abuse). To some extent, the pain of their own experience(s) can be "re-activated" when they hear the child describe a traumatic situation similar to the one they experienced. Unless the foster parent has healed from their own trauma they are at increased risk for internalizing the trauma of their foster child.

4) Children are the Most Vulnerable Members of Our Society: Young children are completely dependent on adults for their emotional and physical needs. When adults maltreat children, it evokes a strong reaction in any person who cares about children. As the primary caretakers for vulnerable children,

Continued on page 5

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The Cost of Caring: Secondary Traumatic Stress

Continued from page 1

foster parents are at increased risk for having a strong emotional reaction to what they hear and learn about.

How do you know if you are suffering from secondary traumatic stress?

One of the most difficult tasks for a foster parent is to recognize if they are suffering from secondary traumatic stress. Every person reacts differently and copes differently with their reaction to adversity. What one person finds helpful may not be helpful for another person and vice versa. All people must remember to call on the coping mechanisms that work best for them. There are, however, several "individual indicators of distress" which can tell us that we are at increased risk for developing secondary trauma. A key indicator is when you find yourself acting and feeling in ways that don't feel normal to you. It is normal for all of us to have a range of emotions that include anger, sadness, rage, depression or anxiety. However, when these emotions become more extreme or prolonged than usual, it is a potential indicator of distress (see table below).

When you find yourself feeling emotional or physical indicators of extreme distress, it is time to step back and evaluate yourself. Are there specific images or cases that keep coming into your head again and again? Are there situations with children that provoke anxiety and that you try to avoid? Are there situations or people that remind you of a particularly distressing case? If you are experiencing some of these indicators, on a consistent basis, you should reach out and ask for help from another foster parent or from your caseworker. If the trauma symptoms become severe and last for more than a few days, you should consider seeing a therapist who specializes in trauma work.

Emotional Indicators	Physical Indicators	Personal Indicators
Anger	Headaches	Self-isolation
Sadness	Stomach aches	Cynicism
Prolonged Grief	Back aches	Mood swings
Anxiety	Exhaustion	Irritability

Self-Care Strategies for Combating Secondary Trauma Stress

Understanding your own needs and responding appropriately is of paramount importance in combating secondary traumatic stress. For foster parents it is critically important to find ways to "get a break" from parenting. To avoid feeling overwhelmed by feelings of frustration and sadness it is important to engage in activities you consider fun and playful. Any person working with maltreated or traumatized children needs to set aside time to rest, emotionally and physically, both their minds and their hearts. Also, they need to connect with their communities in ways other than through their work. For example, they need to help their neighbors, join a garden club or just sit on their back porch and enjoy the sights and sounds of a warm, sunny day.

Remember, in the end, our ability to help children who have suffered depends upon our ability to care for

ourselves...physically, emotionally, socially and spiritually, so we can be there for them when they need us.

Let me close by saying, in approaching your work please listen to the wisdom of the following passage by Marc Parent in his book, Turning Stones: My Days and Nights with Children at Risk.

*"Rescuing one child from the harm of one night is glorious success. The evening is an opportunity to touch a life at a critical moment and make it better-not for a lifetime, not even for tomorrow, but for one moment. One moment-not to talk, but to act-not to change the world, but to make it better. It's all that can be done and not only is that enough-that's brilliant."**

Recommended Reading

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

Stamm, B.H. (1995). *Secondary traumatic stress: Self-care issues for clinicians, researchers, and educators*. Maryland: Sidran Press.

Herman, J. (1997). *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: BasicBooks.

Parent, M. (1996). *Turning Stones: My Days and Nights with Children at Risk*. New York: Ballantine

About the Author

David Conrad is a native of Bismarck, North Dakota. From 1991-1994, he was a supervisor in the ongoing child protection unit in Burleigh County and worked closely with their foster parents. He treasures the memories of those experiences and of working with some truly extraordinary foster parents. He currently is a Senior Instructor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver. He can be contacted at Conrad.David@tchden.org or by calling him at 303-861-6183.

2004 Conference News

By Kenn and Harlene Cole

How can I express the experience of going somewhere and meeting with over a hundred people that share a common bond or commitment? It could be called "AWESOME", "GREAT", "FANTASTIC", and they all would be appropriate. I have just described the 2004 North Dakota Foster Parent Conference, held in Mandan at the Seven Seas Motel, October 1-3, 2004.

Special thank you to Region 7 Foster Parents for hosting the conference this year. Great hospitality and a lot of planning went into this conference and we appreciate it so very much. Also, thanks to Pam Terfehr who did a great job of keeping things running smoothly after unexpected last minute changes and resignations of Board Members.

Again we are so fortunate to have Del Hager - UND Children and Family Services Training Center teaming up with NDFPA to bring a great presentation for the training sessions. We were introduced to Allen and Mary Goodearle, from Plantation, Florida, who spoke to us throughout the

Continued on page 6