

Managing Secondary Trauma in Social Science Research

SECONDARY TRAUMA

What is 'secondary (or vicarious) trauma'?

"Vicarious trauma is the process of change that happens because you care about other people who have been hurt, and feel committed or responsible to help them. Over time this process can lead to changes in your psychological, physical and spiritual well-being."¹

Secondary trauma for Social Scientists

Secondary trauma has been described as a form of traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and burnout, and affects people who work directly and indirectly with human trauma or suffering.

Social science research sometimes relates to the more disturbing and distressing sides of human experience. The researcher may find themselves engaging with individuals who have had harrowing or traumatic experiences, they may witness harrowing conditions, or hear and read distressing stories. This can have a profound effect on the researcher, even when the focus of the research is not directly trauma related, such as researching seemingly benign topics but within families, communities or institutions which have traumatic histories.

Social science researchers often choose to research subjects that are 'close to their heart' which resonate with their own family and social histories. Difficult memories and feelings personal to each researcher can sometimes resurface during the research process.

Students can be especially vulnerable to experiencing secondary trauma because of their potential lack of experience in the field, and particularly where there is a lack of preparedness. They are often reluctant to admit they are struggling as they may be concerned that this will be perceived as some kind of failure, or threaten their research project. This may leave them feeling isolated and unsupported, and perhaps unable to cope or function normally.

It is important to recognise secondary trauma as a potential and very real phenomenon before embarking on a research study, so you can set in place measures to help you manage the psychological challenges of fieldwork beforehand, during and afterwards. Indeed, a significant period of emotional vulnerability can be after fieldwork, when transcribing interviews.

So, in more detail - secondary trauma:

- Is *cumulative* – happens over time with continuous contact with people who are struggling
- Results from the fact that you *care* – empathy opens you up to other people's pain
- Happens because you feel *committed* and *responsible*, which can lead to:
 - high expectations from yourself - feeling burdened, overwhelmed and hopeless
 - overextending yourself beyond what is healthy for you (and your participants)
 - changes in your worldview, impacting on your deep sense of meaning and hope

What does it look like?

- You might find you have difficulty managing your emotions and making good decisions
- Problems in relationships, *especially managing boundaries* between yourself and others:
 - taking on too much responsibility/ trying to step in and control other's lives
 - having difficulty leaving work at the end of the day

¹ This quote, and other materials in this factsheet, are drawn from the web pages of the Headington Institute, an organization which supports humanitarian aid workers. It is recommended as an extremely useful resource for managing secondary trauma.

- Physical problems
 - aches & pains, headaches, illnesses, sleeplessness
 - accidents, carelessness and risk-taking (not necessarily always conscious)
 - you might find yourself either 'speeding up' or 'grinding to a halt'
- Difficulty feeling connected to what's going on around and within you
- Loss of meaning and hope, disillusionment and despair
- Depressive feelings – loss of interest in things, including sex, loss of appetite
- Feelings of guilt and shame, often to do with injustice and Western privilege

WHAT TO DO

Ways of transforming secondary trauma

- Find ways to remind yourself of the importance and value of your work
 - identify and challenge growing cynicism/ disillusionment, with the help of others
 - find a research 'buddy', or a group of fellow researchers, to support each other
- Pay close attention to your own needs – energy levels, 'brainpower'
 - Look after the practicals (eat well, moderate your alcohol intake, exercise, sleep)
 - Pace yourself with your work – take regular breaks (especially when transcribing)
 - Monitor your exposure to traumatic material outside work (film, TV, news)
- Stay connected to friends and loved ones
- Take time to reflect – e.g. keep a reflective journal, or meditation/ prayer/ equivalent
- Deliberately pay attention to the small moments of meaning in life
- Engage in creative pursuits not to do with your intellect – culture/ art/ music/ dance/ sport

ADVICE FOR SUPERVISION

How can researchers use supervision for support?

Supervisors and researchers should work together to:

- Recognise and discuss secondary trauma as an *ongoing issue* throughout the project (including post fieldwork e.g. during transcribing interviews)
- Understand and acknowledge that fieldwork can be very emotionally demanding time and that secondary trauma is a natural reaction to being exposed to human distress.
- Acknowledge and explore the possibility that researchers may have parallels with their chosen field of study in their own family or social history, or may have suffered a previous traumatic experience themselves, making them more susceptible to being affected.
- Go through in detail the resources and support systems available (see the end of this document), both at the university and more broadly. This should be done *at the outset*:

Before fieldwork

- Discuss what issues might be faced and identify the potential for secondary trauma.
- Supervisors can encourage students to raise their own awareness of secondary trauma, and to identify resources and sources of support and attend to self care measures.
- Include serious and detailed consideration of secondary trauma, sources of support and self-care measures in the risk assessment and ethics forms.
- Consider as valuable preparation attendance at one of the Social Science Divisional secondary trauma workshops, or a session with the student/ staff counselling service.

While researchers are away:

- Keep in regular contact and make active checks on their students' welfare and wellbeing, as well as their academic progress.
- Encourage students to take breaks and look after themselves and their emotional wellbeing, including engaging in other areas of life that are not to do with their work.
- Ensure that there is some kind of accessible support for the student in the field.

- Encourage them to keep in regular contact with loved ones through online media/ telephone. Remind students of the facility for online counselling – see details below
- Reassure them that they are more important than their research.

If there is a crisis while a researcher is away:

- **They should not be alone.** Make sure the researcher has someone reliable with them; If you are concerned that they are alone help them identify people they can go to in the field (co-researcher, colleague, housemate, NGO worker, etc.).
- Make sure they are in contact with supportive friends or family back home.
- Contact Oxford's Student Counselling Service (or University Occupational Health Unit for staff) for advice if you are unsure what to do.
- Depending on the severity, you may need to urge them to seek medical help (the insurance emergency provider should be able to help identify a suitable professional).

On return from fieldwork:

- Carry out a de-brief which should include talking through the emotional aspects of the fieldwork as well as the academic. Check out researchers' wellbeing and state of mind.
- Enquire proactively about how the researcher is coping with the emotional demands of writing up the research and in particular transcribing interviews*
- Make recommendations to seek further support where appropriate.
- Pass on any lessons learned to others that might benefit.

** For many researchers, the greatest period of emotional vulnerability comes at a later stage, during the process of transcribing interviews. If a researcher seems to be procrastinating with interview transcription or is less motivated/productive than normal, consider the possibility of vicarious trauma and discuss this directly with them.*

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

Depending on the level of trauma and its impact, support can include: information, knowledge, awareness and self-care strategies; support from friends, family and colleagues; counselling; debriefing with a colleague or supervisor following the activity; a research buddy; or a peer support group where experiences can be confidentially shared and discussed. Please see below (under **Further Resources**) details of **secondary trauma workshops**, and **counselling services** offered by the university.

The [Headington Institute](#) (which supports humanitarian workers) has some very good on line resources which will help you: understand the process of secondary (vicarious) trauma; recognize its signs, and learn strategies to help you address it and cope with it.

The following paper is also very informative: [Doing sensitive research: what challenges do qualitative researchers face?](#)

Further resources

Oxford University

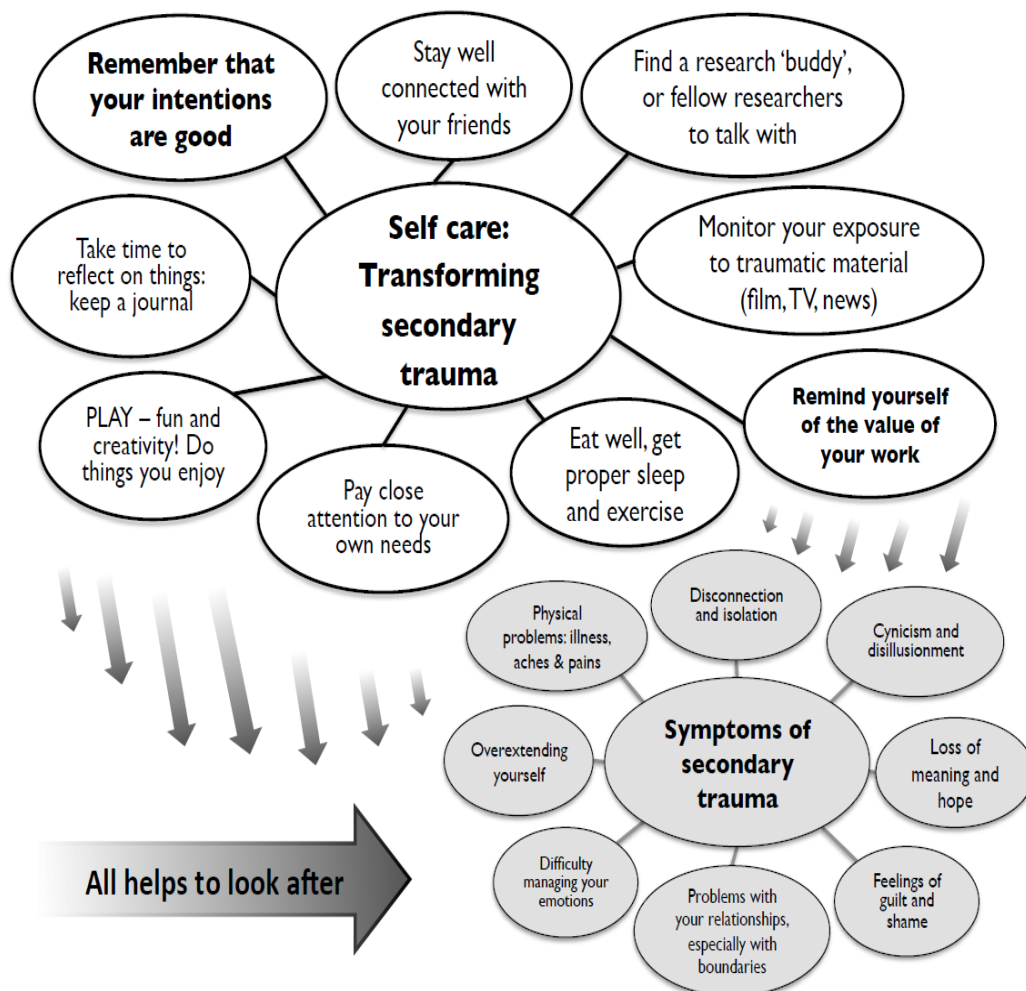
- The Social Sciences Division runs workshops on managing secondary trauma as part of its [training course](#) programme
- [Student counselling service](#) (which offers an online Skype service for students working away from Oxford):
- [Staff counselling service](#) (Occupational Health)
- College welfare officers/ chaplains/ supervisors/ departmental administrators
- Student [Peer support](#)

- [Safety office](#) (for practical elements of fieldwork safety)

Outside the University

- Your GP.
- Online resources from the [Headington Institute](#) and [Achilles](#)
- [MEET](#) in Oxford makes trauma-focused therapy with highly experienced psychotherapists accessible on a low-cost basis. The university [student counselling service](#) can also provide a list of practitioners with specific expertise in the area of trauma and vicarious trauma.
- [MIND](#) (Mental Health Charity)
- [Counselling Directory](#) (national list of counsellors and psychotherapists you can find by region – some may offer reduced fee for students)
- [Oxford Womens' Counselling Centre](#) (reduced cost counselling for women):
- [Oxford Mens' Counselling Service](#) (reduced cost counselling for men)

SECONDARY TRAUMA: IDEAS FOR SELF CARE



This Factsheet has been produced in consultation with Dr Camilla Stack, chartered psychologist and psychotherapist.