

► Heavy workloads and client stories can affect attorneys physically and psychologically. It is important to actively work to stay healthy. For more information, go to texasbar.com/ilap and click on "wellness."

Secondary Traumatic Stress

What lawyers can do to minimize its effects.

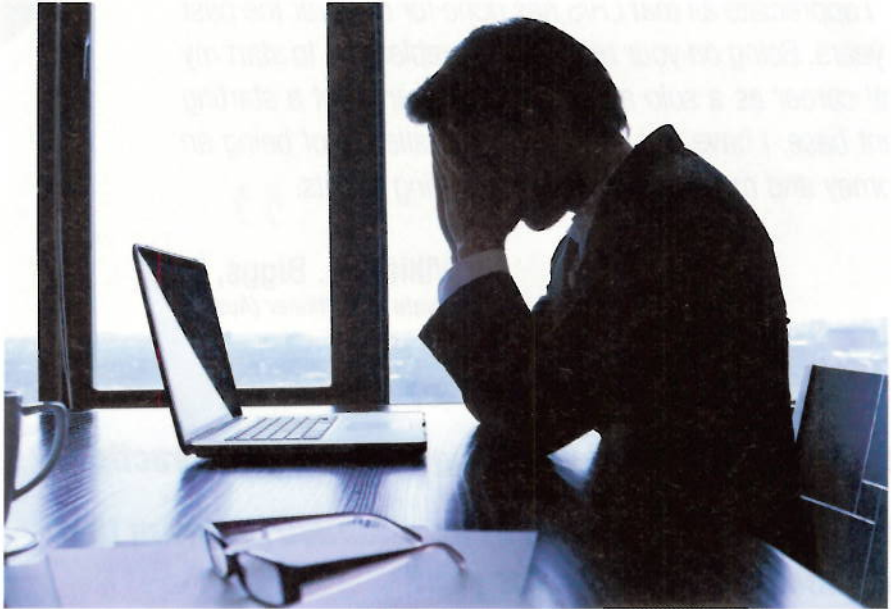
BY LYNN JENNINGS AND CINDI BARELA GRAHAM

Secondary traumatic stress is the indirect exposure to trauma, through listening to or reading another person's firsthand account of a traumatic event.¹ Hearing clients recall, in extensive detail, the emotional and physical abuse they have endured can cause an attorney to experience STS, especially when these stories involve child abuse, neglect, or manipulation.

Emerging literature outlines STS and its associated effects on people working in the "helping" professions, including the law. Many attorneys embrace the notion that they need to know their professional limits when attempting to minimize their clients' pain. Based on this idea, some of the research postulates that legal practitioners should not experience sympathy or even sadness for their clients. However, according to Charles R. Figley, the Paul Henry Kurzweg Chair in Disaster Mental Health at Tulane University, STS can be a workplace hazard.² The compassion that is necessary for cultivating client relationships is also what can cause lawyers to be impacted by their clients' stories, thus increasing the probability they will experience STS.

The Impact

Figley defined STS as a state that "results from a deep involvement with a primarily traumatized individual," which differentiates it from other kinds of stress. The impact of STS is cumulative, pervasive, permanent, and can increase the more often a lawyer hears of abuse, neglect, or trauma. The effects of STS on lawyers



may start as trouble sleeping, poor eating habits, or overall irritability and then progress to substance abuse, relationship problems, hypervigilance, and isolation or attachment issues.

Symptoms

Lawyers experiencing STS typically find it more difficult to unwind after a long day and also struggle to maintain separate professional and personal lives. They might become agitated easily, argue with family more than usual, and desire increasing amounts of alone time after work or at the end of a trial. Changes in routine, sleeping patterns, eating patterns, and irritability are often the initial emerging signs that one is beginning to experience STS. Knowing your own unique warning signs can help you recognize when STS symptoms begin and start to escalate.

When STS becomes a part of a person's life in an overwhelming manner, it can be nearly impossible to treat without medical and psychological intervention. Untreated STS can lead to paranoia or feelings of helplessness and can even have potentially fatal effects such as a heart attack, stroke, or even suicide due to the toll it takes on one's physical, emotional, and psychological well-being.

Management

Communication is key. Family members will likely notice changes in your demeanor and actions before you realize them yourself. Educating your family about STS and what to watch out for can help to identify and manage, or even minimize, its potential negative effects.³

To better process their emotions, lawyers can implement daily self-care

practices, such as getting adequate sleep (approximately seven to eight hours), eating healthy foods, exercising, taking up positive hobbies, consuming minimal or moderate amounts of alcohol, and participating in spiritual activities. When practiced routinely, these strategies can lead to a balanced approach to work and home life, helping to manage the STS phenomenon.

Helping Ourselves and Others

Lawyers who are able to notice their own responses to STS will be better prepared to recognize it in others. Many attorneys can benefit from collaborating and mentoring, as well as checking in with each other after traumatizing events, such as a highly contested trial. As long as it doesn't become excessive, time alone to process experiences can help compartmentalize work-related stress from our personal lives—leading to a healthy work-life boundary.⁴

Having friends in other fields can assist with balancing perspectives. For example, mental health professionals, accountants, medical personnel, or other experts you trust and work with might have unique insight into the cause of the stress and what occurred during a trial or incident. Interaction with them can help the lawyer appropriately regulate his or her feelings and potentially help normalize the traumatic experience.^{5,6}

Practicing law is stressful. There is now some validation that listening to clients' traumatic stories does affect lawyers, no matter how hard they try to maintain neutrality and professionalism.

STS awareness reminds us that we need to take care of ourselves, not only in a professional sense where we seek to be more effective practitioners for our clients but also in a personal sense where we are able to be better partners and friends. It is through this that we can develop that crucial work-life balance.⁷ TBJ

Notes

1. Charles R. Figley, *Compassion Fatigue: Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorders in Those Who Treat the Traumatized* (2nd ed. 1999).
2. *Id.*
3. Cindi Barela Graham and Lynn Jennings, *Secondary Traumatic Stress and Family Lawyers*, *Family Lawyer Magazine* (last updated Aug. 4, 2016), <http://www.familylawyermagazine.com/articles/secondary-traumatic-stress-and-family-lawyers>.
4. *Id.*
5. Sara Lynn Jennings, *The Experience of Secondary Traumatic Stress in Counselors Who Treat Sexually Abused Adolescents* (May 2015) (published Ph.D. dissertation, Texas Tech University).
6. Graham and Jennings (2016).
7. *Id.*

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