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## **Addressing Secondary Traumatic Stress in Veterinary Medicine**

Professionals working in veterinary medicine are in a unique position of having two clients – patients and the humans who care for them. This means that there is a double exposure to secondary traumatic stress, that is, exposure to the pain and suffering of others that overwhelms one's capacity to cope.

### **SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS**

While veterinary medicine is not the only profession susceptible to secondary traumatic stress, veterinary professionals are exposed to a high degree of trauma, bearing witness to the pain and suffering of their patients and clients as well as listening to experiences of pain and suffering from clients and colleagues.

Exposure to pain and suffering is a part of many helping professions. However, secondary traumatic stress (also known as vicarious trauma) refers to the inability to manage the stress associated with exposure to the pain and suffering of others.

### **CAUSES**

According to the Office for Victims of Crime<sup>1</sup>, professionals more susceptible to secondary traumatic stress include those who:

- Have a prior history of trauma
- Experience greater social isolation
- Have a tendency to avoid feelings, withdraw or blame others in stressful situations
- Have a hard time expressing emotions
- Are less experienced at their jobs
- Lack effective training and supervision
- Lack effective and supportive processes to discuss traumatic work experiences

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/vtt/what-is-vicarious-trauma>

## **IMPACTS**

Work-related trauma can generate feelings of fear, worry, sadness and anger, that when left unprocessed, can begin to shift people's worldviews and ways of thinking.

Common signs of secondary traumatic stress include replaying and reexperiencing traumatic events, nightmares, and avoiding situations or things that remind people of the traumatic situation.

## **RESPONSES**

To prevent and/or address secondary traumatic stress, the following should be considered:

Veterinary Practices:

- Provide teams with training on secondary traumatic stress including what it is, what causes it and how to process it.
- Build team tools to process traumatic work experiences. This can include critical incident debriefing and regular team debriefing. Integrating a Veterinary Social Worker or other mental health professional into the team can be highly effective to achieve this.
- Ensure those in supervisory roles can support their team members with the emotional processing of secondary traumatic stress.

Individuals:

- Seek external professional support to process one's emotions and experiences (e.g., therapy).
- Seek support from colleagues and peers.
- Build safe and fulfilling social support networks.
- Integrate intentional and consistent self-care throughout one's day.

## **NERVOUS SYSTEM REGULATION**

Because of the constant exposure to high degrees of stress, veterinary professionals are strongly encouraged to explore nervous system regulation as a foundational tool for health.

According to Dr. Linnea Passaler, nervous system regulation refers to "the ability to move flexibly between different states of arousal in response to stressors"<sup>2</sup>, namely, the fight, flight and freeze responses.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://healyournervoussystem.com/nervous-system-regulation-how-to-start-regulating-your-nervous-system/#:~:text=What%20is%20Nervous%20System%20Regulation,that%20we%20are%20not%20overwhelmed.>

In many instances, people experience a stressor, and their nervous system returns to a state of regulation. This state of regulation is referred to as one's 'window of tolerance'. However, "traumatic events push the nervous system outside its ability to regulate itself"<sup>3</sup> in which case people may find themselves in chronic states of hyperarousal (fight, flight) or hypoarousal (freeze).

Learning how to regulate the nervous system by completing the stress response is important to prevent an internal build-up of emotions, sensations, and thoughts.

While learning to regulate one's nervous system is a lifelong process, the following is introductory material for educational and information purposes only and is not a replacement for therapeutic services. It is encouraged that people work with a nervous system or somatic practitioner to build nervous system regulation. A directory of practitioners can be found here: <https://directory.traumahealing.org/>

### Step 1: Identify Activated Response

The first step to in building nervous system regulation is to become aware of which activated state one is in. It is important to note that a person can be in mixed states which often requires more awareness and time to identify. The following chart, adapted from Lindsey Lockett<sup>4</sup>, provides a summary of physical sensations and behavioural responses to look out for:

<b>FIGHT (Sympathetic branch)</b>	Increased heart rate, irritability, dry mouth, flushing, muscle tension, sweating	Body prepares to defend itself. Explosive, condescending, demands perfection, controlling.
<b>FLIGHT (Sympathetic branch)</b>		Body prepares to run away from the threat. Overthinking, overwhelmed, avoidance, worry, constantly busy, perfectionism, stuck in 'on' position.
<b>FREEZE (Parasympathetic branch)</b>	Decreased heart rate, feeling numb or cold, physical stiffness, heaviness in limbs, restricted breathing, holding of breath	Body immobilizes when it can't survive through fight or flight. Brain fog, difficulty listening, difficulty making decisions, zoning out, self-shaming, self-isolating.

### Step 2: Tune into the Body

Over time as one becomes more comfortable in identifying their states of activation, learning to sit with the discomfort of sensations helps to expand our window of tolerance. Many people benefit from working with a trained somatic practitioner to build this capacity called 'titration'.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mhs-dbt.com/blog/parasympathetic-nervous-system-and-trauma/#:~:text=Traumatic%20events%20push%20the%20nervous,ready%2Dto%2Dreact%20mode.>

<sup>4</sup> <https://lindseylockett.com/>

### Step 3: Discharge or Activate Energy

In situation of acute stress when one must return to a task at hand, building the skills to complete the stress response is paramount for physical, emotional, and mental health. When a person is in a state of fight or flight, energy needs to be discharged from the body. When a person is in freeze state, energy needs to be mobilized back into the body. The following chart provides a few examples on how to complete the stress response:

#### FIGHT

Discharge: squats, scream into a pillow, clench fists and release, cry, laugh, etc.  
Breathwork: exhale needs to be longer than inhale

#### FLIGHT

Fast Forward Movement: run, walk  
Shake: discharge panicky energy  
Grounding: Sit outside, visualize energy leaving your body

#### FREEZE

Conscious Breathwork: e.g. Wim Hoff, Voo Breathing  
Focus on one small thing you can do  
Co-regulate

This process allows a person to return to their window of tolerance, so they are more able to complete the stress response and continue with their work from a more grounded place.

Engaging in daily resourcing activities is as important as acute regulation. While not exhaustive, the following provides some examples:

<b>Breathwork</b>	Diaphragmatic Breathing (double breathing), Longer Exhale (4-7-8, 7-11), Five-Finger Breathing <i>*Please note breathwork is not always suitable in all circumstances<sup>5</sup>.</i>
<b>Grounding</b>	5-4-3-2-1, Feet on ground, Visualization
<b>Easeful Movement</b>	Stretch, Walk, Yoga, Muscle relaxation, Dance
<b>Nature</b>	Mindfully experience nature by engaging with senses
<b>Self-Soothe</b>	Hand over heart, Hold your own hand, Hug yourself, Hum, Sing, Weighted blankets

Nervous system is a slow and lifelong process that is worth the investment.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/this-emotional-mind/202111/when-take-a-deep-breath-can-be-bad-advice>