

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™



# Protecting Physician Wellness: Working With Children Affected by Traumatic Events



Pediatricians need to take care of themselves. The stress from working with children who have experienced traumatic events like adverse childhood experiences can be particularly hard on pediatricians and their teams. The effects pediatricians may start to see from repeated exposure to this stress can look very much like what the children and families are experiencing, including

- *Hypervigilance*
- *Hopelessness*
- *Inability to embrace complexity*
- *Anger and cynicism*
- *Sleeplessness*
- *Fear*
- *Chronic exhaustion*
- *Physical ailments*
- *Minimizing*
- *Guilt*

Obviously, when pediatricians or coworkers begin to experience these effects—often referred to as *secondary traumatic stress*<sup>1</sup>—it affects their own lives but can also affect the way they interact with patients and families and the practice environment. There are things, however, that can be done in the practice environment as well as within an individual’s life to help prevent and effectively respond to secondary traumatic stress.

## THE PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT



There are a number of ways in which a practice functions that can be changed to effectively support pediatricians and others. First, acknowledging that secondary traumatic stress can occur and ensuring that all staff in the practice are trained to understand its causes, effects, and methods to respond are important. Second, practices can look at balancing patient caseloads in such a way that one pediatrician or another clinician is not taking on all of the children with the most intense situations. Practices can also ensure that staff meetings, supervision, team huddles, and other encounters include time for processing difficult situations and giving and receiving support from the team.<sup>1</sup>

## AN INDIVIDUAL RESPONSE



The protective factors<sup>2</sup> a pediatrician needs to stay healthy and resilient overlap with what is recommended for parents. Positive relationships with individuals who can provide support are important. Pediatricians benefit when there are colleagues or friends who will encourage them to pursue a work-life balance, maintain healthy habits, and remain self-aware of the effects of their work. It is important for pediatricians to identify interests outside of work and make time for them. Finally, seeking support and sometimes making significant changes in practice can be very important for the well-being of pediatricians, the practice, patients, families, and friends.<sup>1</sup>

### Additional Resources

This content has been adapted from the excellent work done by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN). More information can be found on the NCTSN Web site at <http://nctsn.org/resources/topics/secondary-traumatic-stress>.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has a special interest group focused on [physician wellness](#). Additionally, the AAP Disaster Preparedness Advisory Council developed an *AAP News* article, “[Dealing with Disasters](#),” to provide guidance on how leaders can best support physician wellness, particularly when a disaster has occurred.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Secondary traumatic stress. <http://nctsn.org/resources/topics/secondary-traumatic-stress>. Accessed May 29, 2014

<sup>2</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy. The protective factors framework. <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/the-basics/protective-factors>. Accessed May 29, 2014

<sup>3</sup> Schonfeld DJ. Dealing with disasters: AAP leaders, experts identify strategies to help pediatricians address their own needs. *AAP News*. 2014;35(3):8. <http://aapnews.aappublications.org/content/35/3/8>. Accessed May 29, 2014

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*Please see the AAP Web site for the online version of this document as well as additional information at [www.aap.org/traumaguide](http://www.aap.org/traumaguide)*

*The recommendations in this toolkit do not indicate an exclusive course of treatment or serve as a standard of medical care. Variations, taking into account individual circumstances, may be appropriate.*