



# Strategies for Encouraging Staff Wellness in Trauma-Informed Organizations

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## IN BRIEF

Trauma, an event or set of circumstances that are perceived as potentially harmful, has long-lasting effects. Exposure to trauma, particularly in childhood, can notably increase the risk of serious physical and behavioral health problems throughout life—an idea that health care providers increasingly recognize. Health care providers can address patients' traumatic experiences and their associated health effects by implementing trauma-informed approaches to care. Securing time and resources for staff wellness is one essential element to trauma-informed care, because supporting staff well-being helps them provide high quality care. This brief outlines the impact of chronic work-related stress and provides examples of two organizations that prioritize staff wellness: Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers and Stephen and Sandra Sheller 11th Street Family Health Services of Drexel University.

This brief is part of technical assistance series from *Advancing Trauma-Informed Care*, a national initiative supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and led by the Center for Health Care Strategies. The brief series focuses on practical strategies for fostering trauma-informed approaches to care.

Addressing patients' traumatic experiences is key to improving care for patients, particularly those who have complex medical, behavioral health, and social needs. Though many of the strategies necessary for implementing trauma-informed care relate directly to the patient experience, one key element pertains to how an organization cares for its staff. Specifically, when working with patients with high rates of exposure to traumatic events, staff need to take time for self-care, both for their own wellness and the provider organization's ability to provide high-quality care.

## Impact on Individual Providers

Without safeguards in place to help clinicians and staff process their emotions, anyone working with patients who have experienced trauma may be subject to chronic emotional stress. This stress can then negatively affect their own physical and psychological health. In particular, when clinicians seek to create a compassionate, emotional connection with patients to achieve a deeper understanding of patients' experiences — an aspect of patient-centered health care known as **empathetic engagement**<sup>1</sup> — they are even more likely to experience forms of chronic emotional stress such as secondary traumatic stress, vicarious traumatization, and burnout:

- **Secondary traumatic stress**, also known as **compassion fatigue**, is emotional duress that can result from hearing about another person's firsthand traumatic experiences and may manifest as changes in memory, sense of safety and trust, and other symptoms often associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>2</sup>
- Over time, **secondary traumatic stress** can lead to vicarious traumatization, the cumulative effect on the clinician after consistent exposure to other people's traumatic experiences.<sup>2</sup>

- Often, these indirect exposures to trauma can contribute to **burnout**, a form of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion caused by chronic work-related stress.<sup>3</sup> Burnout is possible in any career and is not necessarily related to hearing about or empathizing with patients' trauma, but clinicians and front-line staff working with trauma survivors are at increased risk.

## Impact on Provider Organizations

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Chronic emotional stress can also affect patients and provider organizations. Clinicians and other front-line staff experiencing any of these conditions may struggle to provide high-quality care to patients. Chronic emotional stress often leads to staff turnover, which can create a negative feedback loop that intensifies similar feelings in remaining employees. Recruiting and training new employees can significantly drive up operating costs, leaving fewer resources for mission-related activities such as patient care, staff training, and program development.

## Preventing Problems by Encouraging Staff Wellness

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Successfully preventing chronic emotional stress can help staff to function optimally, increase staff morale, and reduce expenses associated with staff turnover. Strategies to prevent secondary traumatic stress, vicarious traumatization, and burnout can be broadly categorized as follows:

- **General wellness:** Encouraging and incentivizing activities like yoga, meditation, and exercise;
- **Organizational:** Fostering a culture that allows clinicians to seek support; keeping caseloads manageable; and providing sufficient mental health benefits;
- **Education:** Providing targeted trainings that create awareness of chronic emotional stress and the importance of self-care; and
- **Supervision:** Facilitating staff wellness through management strategies such as reflective supervision, a practice in which a clinician and supervisor meet regularly to address feelings regarding patient interactions.

### Overcoming Common Barriers to Support Staff Wellness Strategies

**Securing Funding for Staff Wellness Strategies:** Identifying funding to invest in staff wellness poses a significant challenge to resource-strapped organizations. The Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers earmarks portions of grants and savings from its accountable care organization to implement strategies to support its staff.

**Making Time for Self-Care:** Health care organizations often struggle with employees feeling as though they do not have the time to participate in staff wellness activities that are offered or practice their own self-care routines. 11<sup>th</sup> Street Family Health Services encourages leadership and supervisors to help staff arrange time for participation, and sets an organizational cultural precedent to prioritize these activities.

## In-the-Field Innovations

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The Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers (Camden Coalition) in Camden, New Jersey, and the Stephen and Sandra Sheller 11<sup>th</sup> Street Family Health Services of Drexel University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, are implementing innovative strategies to promote staff wellness and help prevent and reduce chronic emotional stress in their organizations.

## *Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers*

The Camden Coalition provides an extensive array of wellness benefits and services to its staff, including mental health benefits to encourage staff to participate in self-care practices and use mental health counseling services. The Camden Coalition contracts with a third-party company to provide up to \$2,000 of mental health benefits per employee per year in addition to standard health insurance coverage. These benefits include coverage for the employee and family, including psychiatric evaluation and testing for full-time employees.

The Camden Coalition also supports a culture of wellness through its policies on clinician workload. To encourage work/life balance and avoid burnout from long hours, organizational policies: (1) encourage clinicians to leave their work-designated cell phones in the office overnight; and (2) ensure that care team staff see patients only during office hours within a 40-hour work week. Administrative staff enforce these policies by ensuring work phones are left charging overnight and blocking time on staff schedules to make up for any late hours or “overtime” that were deemed necessary the prior day. When clinicians work late, other staff members provide coverage so clinicians can take “flex time” to maintain a 40-hour work week.

Each morning, teams gather together to kick off the day with a morning “huddle” centered on a different theme — from line-dancing Mondays to “Feelings Fridays.” These huddles give the staff a few minutes to call out a fellow colleague’s good work, let loose with some physical movement, or troubleshoot a nagging issue. Additionally, weekly care planning meetings offer the opportunity to not only discuss patients’ issues and develop care plans, but to come together as a team, lean on each other for support, and feel safe while mentally processing professional or personal issues. The Camden Coalition also employs a PhD-level psychologist to support staff in setting up professional boundaries to prioritize wellness and reduce burnout. The psychologist attends care meetings as needed and reinforces the message that providers cannot care for patients without first caring for themselves.



*The Camden Coalition staff lets loose by line dancing during a morning huddle.*

On an organizational level, The Camden Coalition offers opportunities for staff to spend time together outside of the office, including seasonal events, team retreats, and annual office-wide retreats, to strengthen relationships and foster team-building efforts. Office policies, such as generous paid time off packages, encourage staff to prioritize wellness. Additionally, meeting-free Fridays allow staff uninterrupted time to complete assignments and decompress from the week.

## ***The Stephen and Sandra Sheller 11<sup>th</sup> Street Family Health Services of Drexel University***

The Stephen and Sandra Sheller 11<sup>th</sup> Street Family Health Services of Drexel University (11<sup>th</sup> Street) prioritizes staff satisfaction and wellness by training all staff to adopt mindfulness practices. The organization strives to infuse mindfulness tools, resources, and frameworks throughout both its clinical and organizational culture and processes.

11<sup>th</sup> Street offers mind-body classes for staff, such as yoga, dance/movement therapy, and mindfulness-based stress reduction courses, as well as a staff loss group that comes together monthly to discuss feelings related to patients who have recently passed away. It has also changed its physical space to provide areas for staff to be alone or relax in small groups. Furthermore, it offers a fitness center on site that is open for both patients and staff to use, as well as a nutritional learning kitchen where 11<sup>th</sup> Street plans to offer healthy food items to staff and patients. 11<sup>th</sup> Street also created a staff satisfaction team as a way to reduce staff traumatization and prioritize burnout prevention. This group plans events focused on team-building and interaction, and encourages a culture of relationships and healing.

### **Mindfulness Practice in Health Care**

Mindfulness is the practice of focusing our attention purposely on the present moment and accepting it without judging. Mindfulness training in health care helps clinicians pay attention to what is happening immediately in front of them, opening them to the information being presented in a given moment. This helps providers focus, feel less overburdened, experience greater empathy, develop a deeper connection with patients, and ultimately take more pride and satisfaction in their work.<sup>4</sup>



***Advancing Trauma-Informed Care*** is a multi-site demonstration project to better understand how to implement trauma-informed approaches to health care delivery. Supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and led by the Center for Health Care Strategies, this national initiative is developing and enhancing trauma-informed approaches to care and sharing emerging best practices. For more information, visit [www.chcs.org](http://www.chcs.org).

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> K. W. Saakvitne and L. A. Pearlman. *Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization*. New York: Norton Professional Books, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2011). "Secondary Traumatic Stress: A Fact Sheet for Child-Serving Professionals." Available at: <http://www.nctsn.org/resources/topics/secondary-traumatic-stress>.

<sup>3</sup> Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014). "Chapter 2: Building a Trauma-Informed Workforce." *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services*. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207194/>.

<sup>4</sup> M. S. Krasner, R. M. Epstein, H. Beckman, et al. "Association of an Educational Program in Mindful Communication with Burnout, Empathy, and Attitude among Primary Care Physicians." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 302 (12):1284-1293, 2009.