

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE · ALL GRADES

Self-Care for Teachers

Sustaining yourself in the work

Secondary trauma is real

Teachers who hold space for traumatised children — listening to disclosures, witnessing distress, being present through meltdowns and grief — accumulate what's called **SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS** or **COMPASSION FATIGUE**. The research is clear: the people who do this work without acknowledgment of its cost burn out at higher rates than other professionals. This isn't weakness. It isn't failure. It's a normal response to repeatedly witnessing distress and holding it with care. The medical and emergency-services professions have known this for decades. Teaching is starting to catch up.

What secondary trauma looks like in teachers

<p>Intrusive thoughts about students</p> <p>Thinking about specific children's situations during evenings, weekends, holidays. Not being able to switch off.</p>	<p>Hypervigilance</p> <p>Heightened watchfulness even outside work. Checking on your own children obsessively. Difficulty relaxing in public spaces.</p>
<p>Emotional numbing</p> <p>Feeling less than usual. Disconnected from your own feelings. Unable to enjoy things you used to enjoy.</p>	<p>Cynicism / hopelessness</p> <p>Loss of belief that things can change. 'Why bother?' Increasing cynicism about the system, families, profession.</p>
<p>Sleep difficulties</p> <p>Unable to fall asleep, or waking with school on your mind. Dreams about specific children or situations.</p>	<p>Physical symptoms</p> <p>Headaches, gut issues, recurrent illness, low energy. The body holds what the mind processes.</p>



<p>Avoidance</p> <p>Avoiding particular children, particular meetings, particular topics. Becoming more reluctant to engage with the harder parts of the work.</p>	<p>Increased reactivity</p> <p>Snapping at children, family, partner. Smaller fuse than usual. Feeling 'on edge' more often.</p>
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Who's most at risk

All teachers can develop secondary trauma. Risk increases with:

- Teaching multiple high-need children simultaneously
- Working in high-deprivation areas
- Being a 'safe person' to one or more vulnerable children
- Having own trauma history that resonates with children's stories
- Limited supervision or peer support
- Lack of acknowledgment from leadership about the emotional load
- Being early-career and not yet having defenses
- Naturally empathic personality

The last one is particularly cruel — the teachers most able to do trauma-informed work well are also most at risk of being damaged by it.

What helps

Strategy	Why
Talking to colleagues — debriefing, not gossip	Carrying stories alone is heavy. Sharing reduces load.
Clear work-home boundaries	Phones off. Email off. Specific cut-off time for school thoughts.
Physical movement	Body holds stress. Movement processes it. Walks, sport, yoga.
Sleep protection	Sleep hygiene matters. Blue light, caffeine, news cycle all disrupt.
Therapy or supervision	Talking to a trained other. Many schools / unions offer access.
Connection outside teaching	Friends, family, hobbies that have nothing to do with school.
Acknowledging the cost	Naming 'this is hard' to yourself reduces the cumulative weight.
Knowing when to step back from a child	Not every child can be your safe person. Sometimes others can.

What doesn't help



Common 'solution'	Why it fails
'Just don't take it home'	Caring people DO take it home. Telling them not to is gaslighting.
More resources for the children	Necessary, but doesn't address teacher cost.
A wellbeing day at INSET	Performative. Surface. Doesn't change the systemic load.
Pretending it's fine	Costs more long-term. Burnout, leaving the profession, illness.
Heavy drinking, food, scrolling	Numbing strategies short-term work, accumulate damage long-term.
Self-blame ('I should be coping')	Shame layer makes recovery harder. The work is genuinely hard.

If you recognise yourself here

1. **NORMALISE THE RESPONSE.** You're not weak. You're carrying something heavy. 2. **TELL SOMEONE.** A colleague, a manager, a partner, a therapist. Out of your head into another's ear reduces the weight. 3. **REVIEW YOUR LOAD.** Are you the safe person for too many children? Can someone else share the role? Can you adjust which child gets what level of attachment? 4. **BUILD RECOVERY TIME.** Walks. Reading. Time with people unrelated to school. Genuine rest, not 'rest that involves checking emails.' 5. **CONSIDER THERAPY.** Many schools have access through staff support programmes. Unions often have schemes. Investment in this prevents bigger costs later. 6. **NOTICE THE WARNING SIGNS.** The list above. If three or more are present persistently, it's worth taking seriously. 7. **REMEMBER THE LONG GAME.** You can't help vulnerable children if you're depleted. Looking after yourself isn't selfish — it's a precondition of the work.

A note for school leaders

If you're reading this as a school leader, the most useful things you can do for teachers working with vulnerable children: • **ACKNOWLEDGE THE COST.** Verbally. Repeatedly. 'This work is hard. I see what you're holding.' • **PROVIDE SUPERVISION.** Not management — actual reflective supervision, ideally with someone trained. • **PROTECT WORKLOAD.** The teacher with three high-need children doesn't need extra responsibilities. • **MAKE EAP / COUNSELLING ACCESSIBLE.** And mention it. Often. Without shame. • **MODEL IT YOURSELF.** Talking about your own boundaries, your own debriefing. Without this support from above, individual self-care has limited reach. The system has to change too.

