

A woman with long dark hair is sitting and looking down at a white cup of coffee she is holding. Steam is rising from the cup. She is wearing a green sweater and blue jeans. The background is a textured, light-colored wall.

**KAIL MARIE ROBERTSON AND SHEVEL MAVINS**

# **AM I SUFFERING FROM SECONDARY TRAUMA?**

**A WELLNESS GUIDE FOR HEALTH  
CARE PROFESSIONALS.**

**UNDERSTAND THE EFFECTS OF SECONDARY  
TRAUMA, HOW IT IMPACTS YOUR MENTAL AND  
EMOTIONAL HEALTH, AND HOW TO BEGIN THE  
HEALING PROCESS.**



# TAKING CARE OF YOU



The healthcare profession allows people from all walks of life to get the help they need to live happier and healthier lives. However, healthcare professionals can often find themselves exposed to traumatic stories, situations, and experiences in their line of work. This exposure can lead to a mental health condition known as secondary trauma. Research has suggested that the disease is quite prevalent among healthcare workers.

One study examined mental healthcare workers who worked with military patients. A significant amount of 19.2% (1) of these workers were found to be experiencing secondary trauma.

The COVID-19 pandemic was traumatic for everybody. However, frontline healthcare workers may be the people who were most impacted by the pandemic. One article reported that the prevalence of secondary trauma for frontline healthcare workers was 47.5% (2).

The numbers reported in these two studies were staggering. We believe creating a guide for substance use counselors, therapists, social workers, and other health care professionals about secondary trauma were necessary. Your wellness matters and needs to be prioritized.

# THE IMPACT OF SECONDARY TRAUMA

Secondary trauma, otherwise known as secondary traumatic stress, can be defined as the emotional distress one endures from hearing about the traumatic experiences suffered by another person. According to a definition provided by Dr. Charles Figley(3), secondary trauma often results from helping or having the desire to help a person who has been traumatized. Social workers, therapists, substance abuse counselors, and other healthcare professionals listen to many traumatic experiences daily. Because of this, secondary trauma is a significant mental health issue faced by many in the healthcare profession.

## The Signs and Symptoms of Secondary Trauma

If you believe that you may be experiencing secondary trauma, knowing the signs and symptoms can help you be sure to seek the help you need. One may experience physical, behavioral, and emotional signs of secondary trauma.

The physical signs and symptoms of secondary trauma can include:

- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Illness or pains that are otherwise unexplainable
- Heart palpitations

The behavioral signs and symptoms of secondary trauma can include:

- Avoiding clients or colleagues
- Increased substance use
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits





# SECONDARY TRAUMA SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Changes in the quality of care provided to clients
- Experiencing imposter syndrome
- Sudden issues in personal relationships
- Diminished productivity
- Spacing out more often than usual

The emotional signs and symptoms of secondary trauma can include:

- Irritability or anger
- Emotional fatigue
- Increased feelings of depression and anxiety

**“A true healer is the one who heals himself first so others can benefit from his own healing.”**



- Feeling hopeless, guilty, or pessimistic
- Reduced feelings of empathy toward others
- Feelings of dread associated with certain cases
- A loss of enjoyment in one's work
- Experiencing feelings of sadness or despair
- Feeling as though you are experiencing the event
- Nightmares





- Anxiety, hypochondria, or paranoia
- Social withdrawal
- Avoiding the things that remind you of the traumatic event/story
- Panic attacks
- Intrusive thoughts and imagery
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Struggling to separate work life from personal life
- Suicidal thoughts or ideations

## Why Secondary Trauma is Common Among Health Professionals

Healthcare professionals are at a significantly high risk of developing secondary trauma. Why? Because secondary trauma occurs when one puts in the effort to help another work through traumatic experiences. That is a significant part of the job description for many healthcare professionals. As a healthcare professional, your everyday life is full of hearing about, seeing, and helping others work through their traumatic experiences, leaving you vulnerable to secondary trauma. As you work to help patients and clients experiencing some of the worst, most traumatic moments of their lives, it can be difficult not to experience difficult emotions of your own.

## Secondary Trauma or Vicarious Trauma: What's the Difference?

Secondary and vicarious trauma both describe the impacts working with traumatized people can have on healthcare professionals. Because of this, it can be easy to confuse the two. However, secondary and vicarious trauma describe two different health conditions.

Secondary trauma, on the one hand, describes a type of trauma that can occur suddenly as the healthcare professional listens to their patient or client's story. Secondary trauma was conceptualized to explain why so many healthcare professionals were exhibiting post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms (PTSD) without being directly exposed to any traumatic events themselves.

On the other hand, vicarious trauma describes a type of trauma that occurs after prolonged exposure to their patient or client's suffering, causing significant shifts to the healthcare worker's worldview. Many healthcare workers find that, after prolonged exposure to traumatic stories, their morals, beliefs, worldview, and overall attitude toward life begins to change significantly.

## What Happens When a Health Professional's Secondary Trauma Goes Untreated?

The longer one suffers from secondary trauma, the stronger effects the condition will begin to have on them, their loved ones, and their clients.

Secondary trauma, if left untreated, can have a wide variety of adverse effects on a person's life, impacting their career, relationships, mental health, and overall well-being. A few impacts of untreated secondary trauma can include:

- Relationship issues
- Depression or anxiety
- Poor quality patient or client care
- Career burnout
- A loss of empathy
- Physical health conditions like heart disease
- Higher risk of suicide or substance abuse (4)

## **Treatment Options for Secondary Trauma**

Fortunately, a few different treatment options have been shown to help significantly reduce the symptoms of secondary trauma. Some people may feel better with just one treatment plan, while others may need to pair a variety of treatment plans to begin feeling better. Every case is different. The treatment options for secondary trauma can include the following:

### **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**

As you likely know, CBT is a form of therapy in which one talks through their problems and develops coping mechanisms to reduce them. As a healthcare professional, you may find value in being guided toward finding coping mechanisms to deal with complicated thoughts and feelings.

### **Exposure Therapy**

Secondary trauma can cause an individual to develop sudden fears and anxiety related to the secondary traumatic event. Exposure therapy is a therapy designed to help one face their fears. This could be incredibly valuable in reducing the intense fears, anxieties, and emotions one encounters regarding their trauma.

### **Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)**

EMDR is a form of psychotherapy intended to alleviate symptoms associated with traumatic memories. The treatment targets memories and uses eye movements to help the client reassess the meaning behind the event. This form of therapy is incredibly effective in many cases of PTSD (5).

### **Mind-Body Therapy**

Mind-body therapy is a form of therapy that increases relaxation, eases tension, reduces pain, and improves a person's coping skills. Many symptoms of secondary trauma can increase feelings of stress and anxiety, making the symptoms more and more prevalent. Mind-body therapy techniques can help healthcare professionals cope with the symptoms of their trauma.

### **Medication**

Some cases of secondary trauma may require medication to reduce symptoms like depression and anxiety.



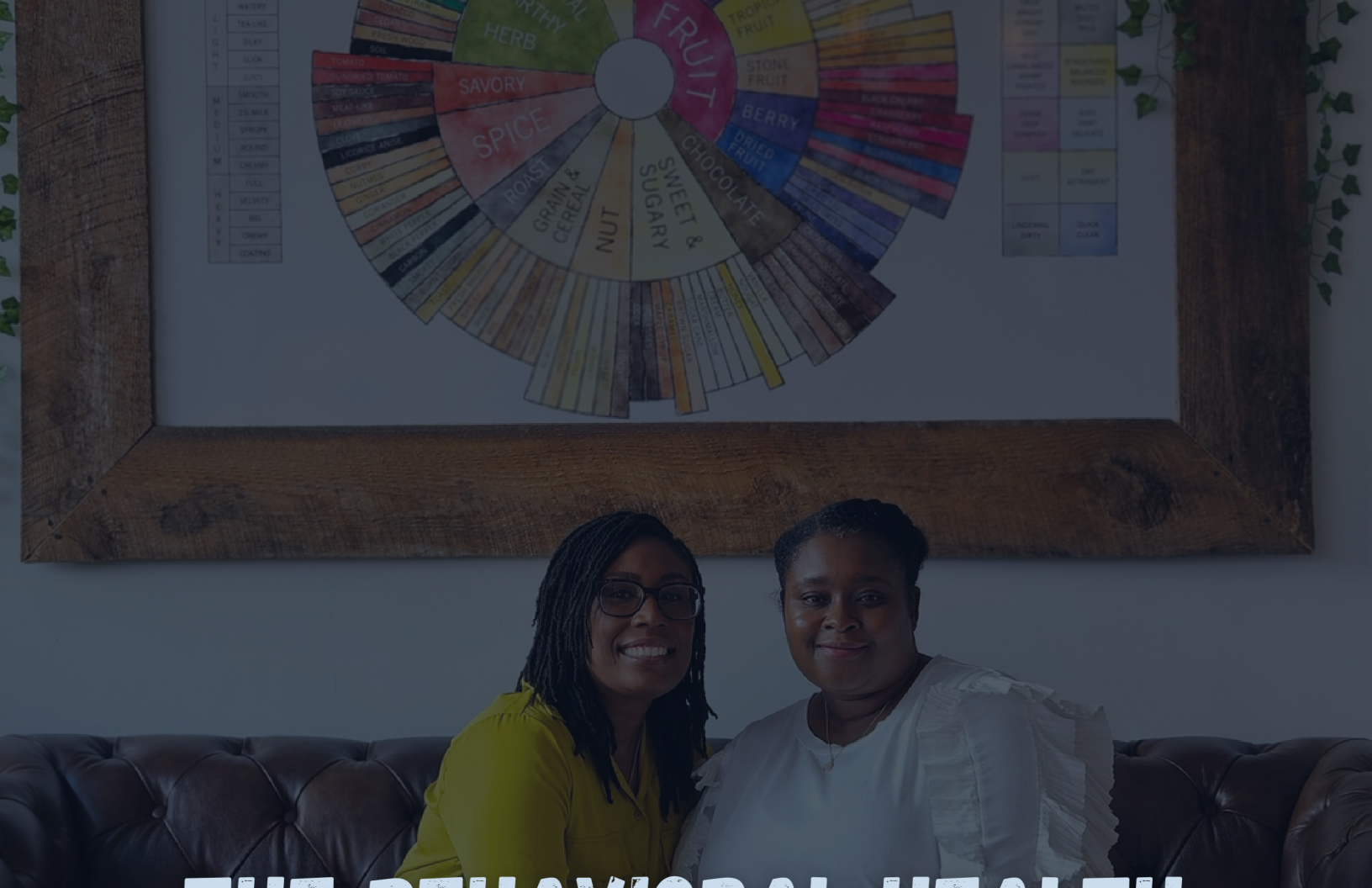
# IT'S OKAY TO SEEK THE HELP YOU NEED



Many healthcare professionals hesitate to seek the healthcare they need due to a common belief that, as a healthcare professional, you should be able to handle your mental health issues without the help of someone else. However, this belief can be detrimental to your health and happiness. If you believe you may be struggling with secondary trauma, reach out to a mental healthcare professional today and get the help you need to live your happiest, healthiest life.

## References:

1. [Secondary Traumatic Stress Among Mental Health Providers Working With the Military](#)
2. [Secondary Traumatic Stress and Burnout in Healthcare Workers during COVID-19 Outbreak](#)
3. [Compassion Fatigue](#)
4. [The prevalence and impact of post-traumatic stress disorder and burnout syndrome in nurses](#)
5. [What is EMDR?](#)



# THE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH ACADEMY (BHMBA)

We understand the importance of transformative healing and how it can positively impact our families and careers. By going through our healing journeys, we have strengthened our family bonds, excelled in our professional lives, and become respected leaders in our respective fields.

We strive to empower individuals and organizations to cultivate new patterns of behavior, foster meaningful connections, and foster healthy environments. Whether you are seeking personal transformation or seeking to create a positive workplace culture, we are here to support you. Join us in answering the call to break the cycle and be the change.

*Shevel Mavins and Kaii Marie Robertson are mental health and wellness experts with over 20 years of experience. They have provided wellness trainings for various organizations, including AARP, AdCare Institute of Maine, Wake Forest School of Medicine, and Central Piedmont Community College. They are committed to helping individuals and organizations achieve wellness through practical steps.*



# COPYRIGHT DISCLAIMER

---

Copyright © [2023] Kaii Marie Robertson and Shevel Mavins]

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. For permissions contact:  
[Contact: thebhmba@gmail.com]

