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Preventing Secondary Trauma: Supporting Staff in School

Working on the front line with those who have experienced trauma and neglect, and abuse can be very challenging on both a professional and personal level. The emotional impact of caring for dysregulated children can be profound, as students with big feelings tend to generate big feelings in those around them. Children's behaviour and history can sometimes bring our own issues to the surface and leave us feeling unsettled. Like adoptive parents and permanency carers, school staff may hold information for children about the deeply traumatic events they have experienced, including horrors perpetrated by other adults. Many who choose to go into education are natural caregivers. While empathy is a wonderful trait to have, it can make it tricky for staff to manage the impact of their work on themselves

Secondary trauma can result from living or working with children who have been through traumatic life events. All people who live closely alongside traumatised children and adolescents, including adoptive parents, permanency carers, social workers, and school staff are at risk.



When a person is experiencing secondary, or vicarious, trauma, they can exhibit signs like the traumatised children they work with, without having endured any trauma themselves. Staff may begin to experience their pupils difficult feelings, either about themselves or others. Those experiencing secondary trauma may not be aware at the time of what is happening though them.

When people experience secondary trauma, they might feel or experience:

- Intense feelings and intrusive thoughts about a child's trauma
- Loss of focus and decreased concentration
- Feelings of emotional numbness and detachment
- Increased irritability and negativity
- Physical symptoms, such as increased fatigue or illness
- Lack of motivation, dissatisfaction, and disengagement in work life

These thoughts and feelings can feel shameful to both parents and professionals. After all, we are the grown-ups, so surely we are supposed to be able to cope? Negative feelings towards the child may be even harder to face or admit to. Even if we recognise that we are feeling the effects of the work we are doing, we may judge ourselves as unprofessional for somehow failing to keep our professional hat on.

Blocked Care

Blocked care is a related idea to secondary trauma that is increasingly acknowledged in the adoption world. As it is based on sound neuroscience, blocked care may be a helpful idea for staff who balk at more touchy-feely explanations.

Therapists and Psychologists Dan Hughes and Jonathan Baylin (2012) explain that infants have evolved to activate the reward systems in adults brains to motivate adults to look after them. This is very important if the adults are to keep caring for them despite the adverse effects of being a parent, such as very little sleep. Many of us experienced feeling slightly cross towards a baby who wont stop wailing, only to forgive them everything when they catch our eye or smile at us. Hughes and Baylin explain that our dopaminergic, or reward, system is flooded with dopamine in this moment, and that we are hooked, doing everything we can to make the infant happy and elicit another smile or giggle.

Teaching or parenting an adopted or a care experienced child, however is harder. They do not always respond to our care, affection and attention in the ways that typically developing children do. We might work hard to gain a child's trust, only for them to be suspicious or treat us as their abusers. We might feel we are getting on well with a child only for them to seem to turn on us in hostility. We might offer a lot but feel continually rejected. When this happens, our reward system runs low. The systems in our brain that support empathy start to shut down in an attempt to protect us from rejection and pain. We might feel unmotivated and then feel guilty about feeling unmotivated. Our natural instincts to care for the child are blocked.

Experiencing this block doesn't mean we are uncaring people. It is crucial staff know this, to understand themselves and their colleagues. It also gives them a framework through which to understand adoptive parents and permanency carers who may be burnt out at times by many years of intensive parenting.

Below is a **handout about burnout and secondary trauma and its impact for leadership and staff to keep in mind – Leadership and School Management staff should ensure all of their school based staff have a copy of this to ensure they are aware of the signs of burnout**

Take a moment to reflect....

- Have you been experiencing any of these common signs of burnout
- When you're stressed, which of these tends to be the first to appear for you?

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Search:

Psychological	Physical	Behavioural
Irritability	Sleep disturbances	Increased risk taking
Anxiety	Change in appetite	Over or under eating
Depression	Easily startled	Aggression
Anger	Stomach problems	Hyper-alertness
Mood swings	Headaches	Listlessness
Feeling 'over emotional'	Rapid heart rate	Often late to work
Emotional numbing	Fatigue	Often calling in sick
Poor concentration	Muscle tension	Often working overtime
Intrusive thoughts	Unable to relax	Change in smoking and drinking behaviours
Disorganised and confused thoughts	Back and neck pain	Change in personal grooming and/or hygiene

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Looking after staff

Secondary trauma and blocked care are not good for staff, students, or schools. They result in tightly wound environments where everybody feels fraught and staff turnover is high, making it even more difficult for the school to settle.

- Working with these children can at times be deeply difficult and wearing. Stressed teachers just cannot be emotionally grounded enough to hold 30+ different children's needs in mind. We cannot ask staff to do the difficult job of looking after our adopted and care experience children and young people unless we look after them too.

- School staff need supervision and support! It is crucially important and a very tough job being a teacher, with many time consuming and often conflicting demands. They need support and recognition.

We encourage your school to include staff in its mission statement, with acknowledgement that staff care ultimately affects student care. Leadership and School Management should set the tone in valuing staff as the school's most important resource. Make it clear that you respect and encourage a balance of work and personal life, including the risk associated with working with traumatised students. If staff do being to experience an emotional reaction, they will not feel weak, ineffective or powerless, but will be able to seek support without fearing judgement.

Promoting wellbeing through holding wellbeing days in which staff are encouraged to destress and unload can send a strong message that your school cares about its staff.

Peer Support

Peer support can serve as an important coping resource for those working with dysregulated children. Sharing experiences with other educators can allow staff to vent their feelings, normalise their emotional reactions, and decrease feelings of isolation. Team members can act as a source of validation and resilience for their co-workers. They can help each other to see other perspectives when they are caught up in experiencing the child's behaviour as personal to them. You could set up facilitated groups in which staff can come together to reflect on their practice and debrief after stressful situations. Having a structured discussion that maintains empathy for both colleagues and the child can be helpful to staff.

Supervision

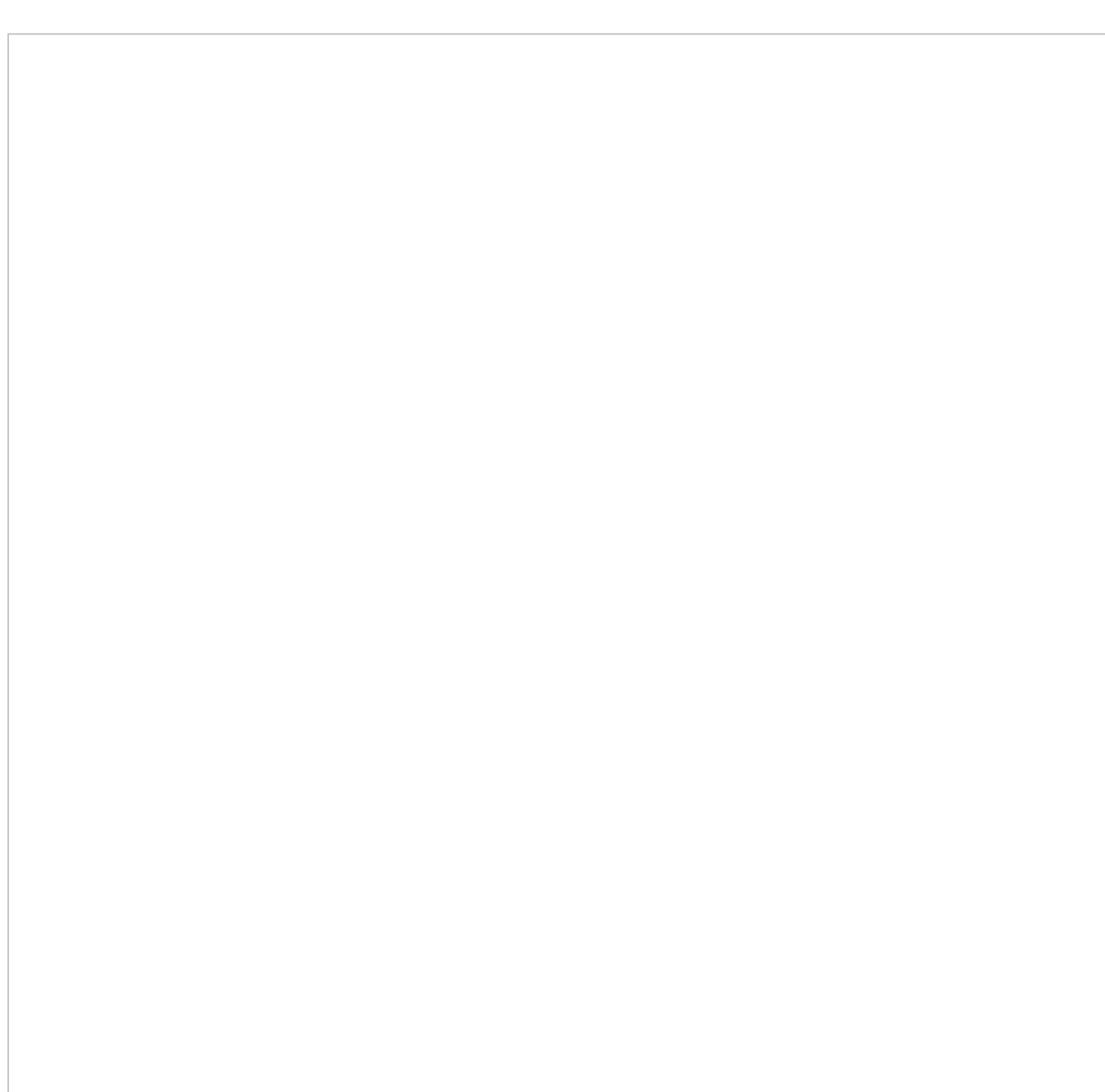
Teachers do complex work in relation to children's psychological and safeguarding needs, which can take a heavy toll on them both professionally and personally.

Supervision is not about performance management. It is not about checking, measuring, or evaluating what staff are doing. It provides a safe, supportive, confidential space to process current practice, reflect professionally and personally and develop professional practice. When it works well, supervision can reduce stress-related sickness, improve staff retention, and ensure staff can give their best to children.

Self-Care

Self-care involves looking after ourselves in terms of our lifestyle and work-life balance, both overall and day-to-day. Self-care can be difficult to prioritise for caregivers, including teachers, yet it is essential in preventing burnout and helping staff to maintain empathy for students.

Below is a self-care wheel that sets out some different ways you can apply self-care.



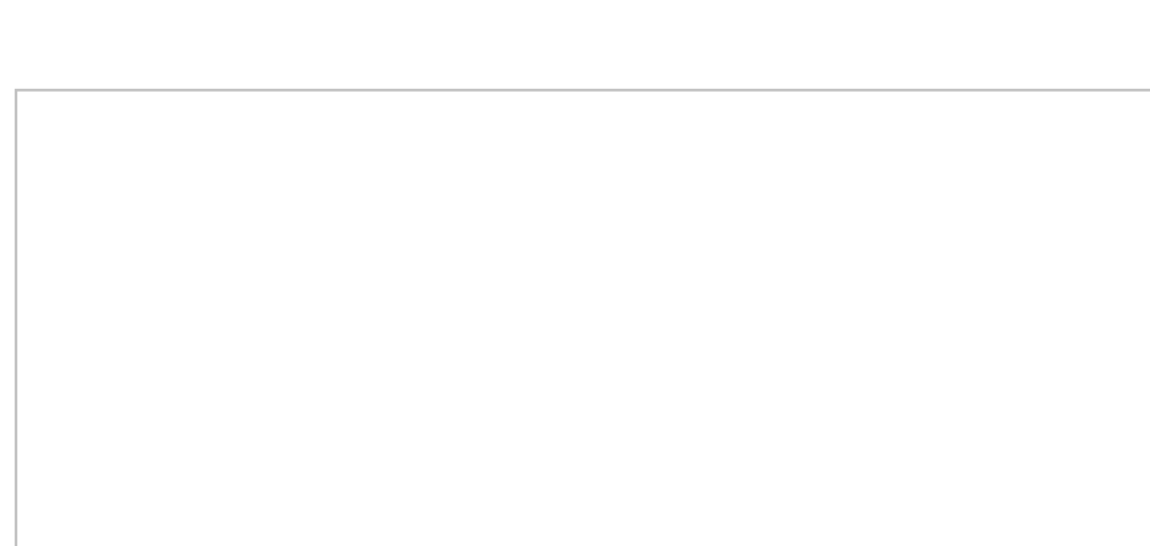
Work together with colleagues to think about how your school supports self-care in each of these six areas. Below is a blank Whole School Self-Care support chart for you to fill in as a group/school team. It is hugely helpful to gain the views of the staff in your school to understand the ways in way they feel supported in each domain. This will show you where your school is doing well, and which areas staff feel they have less support in.

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Search:

Area of Self-Care	What we do well	Next Steps
Physical		
Emotional		
Intellectual		
Social		
Creative		
Spiritual		

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FIND THE TIME

The schedule of education is often jam packed down to every last minute and so the first step in maintaining well-being is building in time to look after yourself. This may involve saying no to extra commitments, both in and out of the workplace. A good way to start might be making sure you take your full break/lunch and spend it doing something for you.

GET SOME REST

Lack of sleep over a prolonged period can have hugely detrimental effects on your health, psychological well-being and performance at work. For improved concentration and mood, research suggests we should be getting between 7 and 9 hours of sleep every night. Try to stick to a sleep routine which allows you to feel fully recharged. A more awake you will make for more awake students and give you the energy to remain strong in the face of adversity.

CONNECT WITH OTHERS

Taking time to talk with co-workers, friends and family can act as catharsis and release built up stress, especially after a bad day. Sharing your experience and feelings with others can also help you gain perspective on tricky situations. But don't just talk about work – make sure to spend time relaxing and having with others as well.

GO OUTDOORS

It's easy to fall into a pattern of moving between home, a classroom, car and home again without ever really being outdoors at all during the day. When we are constantly "cooped up" we miss out on the natural world around us. Nature is peaceful and restorative for many people. Incorporate some light exercise into it for an extra boost. A brisk walk around a park can work wonders.

EXPAND YOUR MIND

Teachers spend so long trying to develop the knowledge and skills of their students that they can often forget to attend to their own growth and personal development. This looks different for different people and could involve new training, revisiting an old hobby, attending a local crafts workshop, or reading a book. Whatever takes your fancy.

Resources:

Brain-Based Parenting – The Neuroscience of Caregiving for Healthy Attachment: 0 (Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology). Amazon.co.uk