



Juvenile Probation Officer Checklist for Addressing Staff Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) & Youth Trauma During Crisis

During a crisis, a key step toward effectively fulfilling probation officer duties is ensuring you are not too emotionally drained and have the resources to take care of your family and life responsibilities.

By providing support for managing secondary traumatic stress (STS), or the emotional distress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another¹, probation departments and officers are better equipped to manage the increased risk for burnout juvenile justice professionals have before, during, and after a crisis.

The risk for burnout and negative health outcomes related to STS symptoms can be particularly high for juvenile probation officers given their caseloads may include events such as youth suicide or serious injury due to physical or sexual abuse, violent re-offenses, and violent or unexpected death of a justice-involved youth. Building routines that protect against the impact of STS and burnout are necessary for ensuring you are at your best at work and in life.²

One of the most effective strategies for countering the impact of STS and burnout is supporting your self-efficacy—your belief in your ability to do your job effectively. During and after a crisis, one of the most empowering skills a probation officer can have is certainty in their ability to effectively respond to the impact of crisis on youth reintegrating into the community. Few skills bolster self-efficacy better than having trauma-informed skills to help youth and their families understand the impact of trauma and receive the supports necessary to thrive after a crisis. Below are key STS-related areas to check routinely for your ongoing wellness and bolstering your trauma-informed skills to work with youth.

1. Increase Awareness of STS Symptoms and Respond Early

- Notice symptoms of STS and seek education on the effects of STS on physical, mental, and even spiritual health. These symptoms mirror those of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which include but are *not limited* to:
 - Hypervigilance (always on alert or on edge)
 - Chronic fatigue, sleeplessness
 - Numbing of emotions or intense emotional reactions (e.g. anger, sadness)
 - Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
 - Feelings of guilt and fear
 - Difficulty listening
 - Avoidance or desensitized to the pain and suffering of others

- STS is also known as “compassion fatigue” and can deplete your ability to use the very emotion that makes many juvenile probation officers so effective at their jobs: empathy for justice-involved youth, especially when many others do not show them empathy. This same quality also makes juvenile probation officers extremely vulnerable and at-risk for developing STS symptoms given their constant *exposure* to stress and secondary trauma inducing events including:
 - Removing youth from dangerous or unstable home environments and having limited safe options to place youth.
 - Feeling powerless to prevent youth self-destructive behavior before, during, or after placement.
 - High caseloads with varying levels of support to effectively address the trauma youth experience and difficulty engaging youth families in recovery.
 - Observing discriminatory or bias actions toward youth and feeling uncertain of how to address the systemic issues that create traumatic events during the placement process, and particularly, during a crisis that disproportionately impacts more vulnerable youth such as low-income, ethnic minorities or sexual minority youth.
 - Personal history of trauma and cumulative impact of stressful life experiences.

- You know yourself the best and know when you are far off your own “normal.” Paying attention to triggers (people, events, or situations that cause stress) for changes in your mood is a quick first step to taking control of STS symptoms before they become more severe.

- **Actions to start this week**
 - Check for your level of STS and burnout by completing the [Professional Quality of Life Scale](#). Complete all three pages to understand your total score.
 - Find a trusted colleague, supervisor, or friend and ask whether the two of you can check-in with one another weekly to identify events that may have increased STS exposure or caused stress. During your check-in identify triggers and strategies that have worked to lessen STS symptoms, feelings of burnout, and stress.

2. Recognize Limits for Psychological Safety and Actively Engage Support

- In these unprecedented times, there are several events out of our control at work and home such as the ability to conduct visits and see youth living conditions or ensure our own families are able to maintain employment and effectively engage in school, among many other uncertainties. Despite this not being in your control, it has the potential to undermine feelings of psychological safety and trust in others.

- Psychological safety reflects a personal belief in your ability to take care of stress in your life or an ability to connect with someone who can help you get your needs met. A key step to managing STS and stress during a crisis is working to restore a sense of psychological safety.

- Psychological safety is often restored by connecting with supports that provide strategies for more effectively dealing with challenges. A few ways to begin connecting with supports include:
 - Consult with your supervisor and seek modifications to your job as you are able. Request opportunities to briefly engage in self-care practices during the day after experiencing triggering situations or exposure to traumatic stories of youth.

- Identify specific supports for different needs. Ask a colleague to be a support for work and ask a friend to be a support for challenges happening at home. Avoid looking for only one person to help with all work and life challenges.
- Exposure to others traumatic stories may trigger reactions to previous experiences of stress or trauma. Connecting with a mental health professional through employee assistance programs or other online providers available through your insurance provider provides an impartial expert to game plan how to deal with challenges.

➤ **Actions to start this week**

- Practice at least 5-minute wellness activities every couple of hours independently or with a partner. Activities can include having a walk and talk with a colleague in-person or virtually on the phone, mindfulness activity, or connecting with someone who helps you feel recharged.
- Once a week make a list of everything that causes stress. Divide it into two categories: what you can control and what you cannot control. Work with your partner to problem solve the stressful life events you have control over and explore strategies for how to better emotionally respond to situations you do not have control over—include strategies such as connecting with an impartial expert such as a mental health professional or spiritual support.

3. Bolster Skills for Addressing Youth & Family Trauma

- Recognize the signs of present and ongoing trauma in youth and their family. During a crisis that requires quarantine, risk for domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual abuse substantially increase as youth may be at home with perpetrators of past physical and emotional violence. It is particularly important to pay attention to avoidance behavior, suspected substance use, severe mood change, loss of appetite, trouble sleeping, or expressing feelings of not wanting to live.
- Communicate a clear plan for contact and support. The uncertainty of a pandemic or crisis can put youth and families in survival mode—which makes them more on edge and protective when working with others. This may often look like oppositional behavior. Given the real danger of possible infection, it may be hard for youth and families to communicate their attempts to keep themselves safe and it may appear that they are being resistant to directives.
- Respond to signs of unsafe behaviors or situations. Mental health challenges related to trauma such as depression and anxiety may be more frequent during a time that forces individuals to isolate from others or remain with people who can trigger negative behavior. Coupled with the potential of violence in the home related to abuse, these situations can lead to situations youth hurt themselves, others, or are hurt by others.
- Empower with choice. Youth who have experienced trauma are sensitive to situations that make them feel powerless. The pandemic can make youth and families feel that their choices are limited, and they are being coerced to comply with policies and procedures that can jeopardize their health and safety.
- Communicate value and validate feelings. Youth may have very legitimate reasons to be angry, sad, or feel a host of other emotions, but feel no one cares or will take action to help them. These feelings can lead to distrust for others and quickly escalated interactions with authority figures.

- Create opportunities to address the damage trauma has caused. Many youth want to find ways to deal with the damage caused by a traumatic event or injustice they have experienced. During a pandemic, the cumulative impact of previous traumas and possible current injustices (such as healthcare staff reluctance to test youth's family members for COVID-19 symptoms) may cause further resistance to working with others, particularly probation officers and healthcare systems.
- Make information digestible and collaborate for solutions. There is the potential for youth to receive several directions during this time and have several expectations from you as a probation officer and others. This information overload can trigger youth and make them feel incapable of completing these demands—leading to giving up, non-compliance or anger and frustration with individuals requesting them to complete tasks.

➤ **Actions to start this week**

- Check in with youth routinely (at least once a week) to see if there have been experiences that are particularly stressful or made them feel unsafe. Ask them how they've dealt with it. When sensing more is happening than is being shared, clearly express your concern.
- Meet with mental health and child welfare professionals routinely (at least once a week) to advocate for the support youth and families may need to remain safe, strategize how to connect with youth and family to problem-solve challenges, and report as mandated while attempting to preserve the relationship with youth and family as best as possible.
- Verbally acknowledge youth may have a host of feelings given the pandemic and requirements to remain physically distant from people they care about. Give youth permission to share those feelings with you. Share reasons why you think their feelings are valid and communicate how you've dealt with difficult feelings during the pandemic. Specifically, directly saying "I understand why you feel like that" and explain to them why you understand can help to prompt healthy coping strategies and build trust.
- Try to learn healthy strategies youth have used in the past to deal with difficult situations and work with them to find similar outlets for dealing with current stress. Make an effort to highlight positive behaviors youth have shown in the past even if they currently appear non-compliant.

4. Reduce STS Exposure and Engage Vicarious Resilience and Compassion Satisfaction

- Symptoms of STS become most severe when we are constantly exposed to the traumatic stories of others. We can counter the impact of traumatic stories by exposing ourselves to stories of people who overcame traumatic life experiences. These counter stories promote vicarious resilience and help us feel more hopeful about the future.
- What type of information do you read in your "free time"? If you are already constantly exposed to trauma at work, it is important you do not continually expose yourself in your free time. Constant exposure to the news can intensify STS symptoms and undermine feelings of hope that are pivotal to further strengthening psychological safety during a crisis.

- Feeling hopeful and that you are capable of doing your job well goes beyond countering the impact of STS and can prompt actions that increase compassion satisfaction (the pleasure you derive from your work), healthy habits for your mental wellbeing, and motivation to remain connected with your work because it has meaning. Ask yourself what motivated you to be in this job in the first place and see if it still aligns with your values. Reassess if you need to and recognize that you are only human!

- **Actions to start this week**
 - Each week engage in a new activity that is entirely unrelated to your job to diversify how you spend your time and energy. Learning a new or fun activity provides an opportunity for your mind to rest from stress and return to your challenges refreshed with potentially new strategies for solving problems.

 - Review your *Compassion Satisfaction* score on the *Professional Quality of Life Scale* and identify items where you scored the highest. Identify what contributes to you feeling motivated and satisfied with work and practice doing something related to that each week independently or with your partner.

References

- ¹ National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Secondary Traumatic Stress Committee. (2011). Secondary traumatic stress: A fact sheet for child-serving professionals. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.
- ² Lewis, K. R., Lewis, L. S., & Garby, T. M. (2013). Surviving the trenches: The personal impact of the job on probation officers. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 38(1), 67-84.

Suggested Citation

Lau-Johnson, W.F. & Pickens, I. (2020). *Juvenile Probation Officer Checklist for Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) During Crisis*. iOpening Enterprises: Los Angeles, CA.

For more information or technical assistance contact: info@iopeningenterprises.com