



Breaking The Silence: An Arts-Based Phenomenological Exploration Of Secondary Traumatic Stress In U.S. Student Affairs Professionals

By: Jason Lynch, PhD.

Abstract

Historically, college student affairs personnel have played a crucial role in student development, support, and success. Today, these professionals have found themselves increasingly acting in the capacity of first responders for various student crises. Literature in other helping professions such as social work, K-12 education, and counseling all indicate that repeated or extreme exposure to traumatic events, or details of traumatic events, can have a significant negative impact on the well-being of professional helpers. Currently, literature centered on individuals working in college student affairs does not directly address the issue of secondary traumatic stress. It is the aim of this study to explore the impact of trauma- support work on student affairs professionals by exploring this phenomenon through the lived experiences of professionals who have supported students who have experienced trauma.

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Breaking the Silence: An Arts-Based Phenomenological Exploration of Secondary Traumatic Stress in U.S. Student Affairs Professionals



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Presentation Outline



- Terms
- Purpose Statement
- Research Questions
- Methods
- Findings
- Implications
- Limitations
- Q&A

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Introduction

TRAUMA

The unique individual experience of an event or enduring conditions, in which the individual's ability to integrate [their] emotional experience is overwhelmed, or the individual experiences a threat (or subjective threat) to life, bodily integrity, or sanity" (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995, p. 60)

Secondary Traumatic Stress

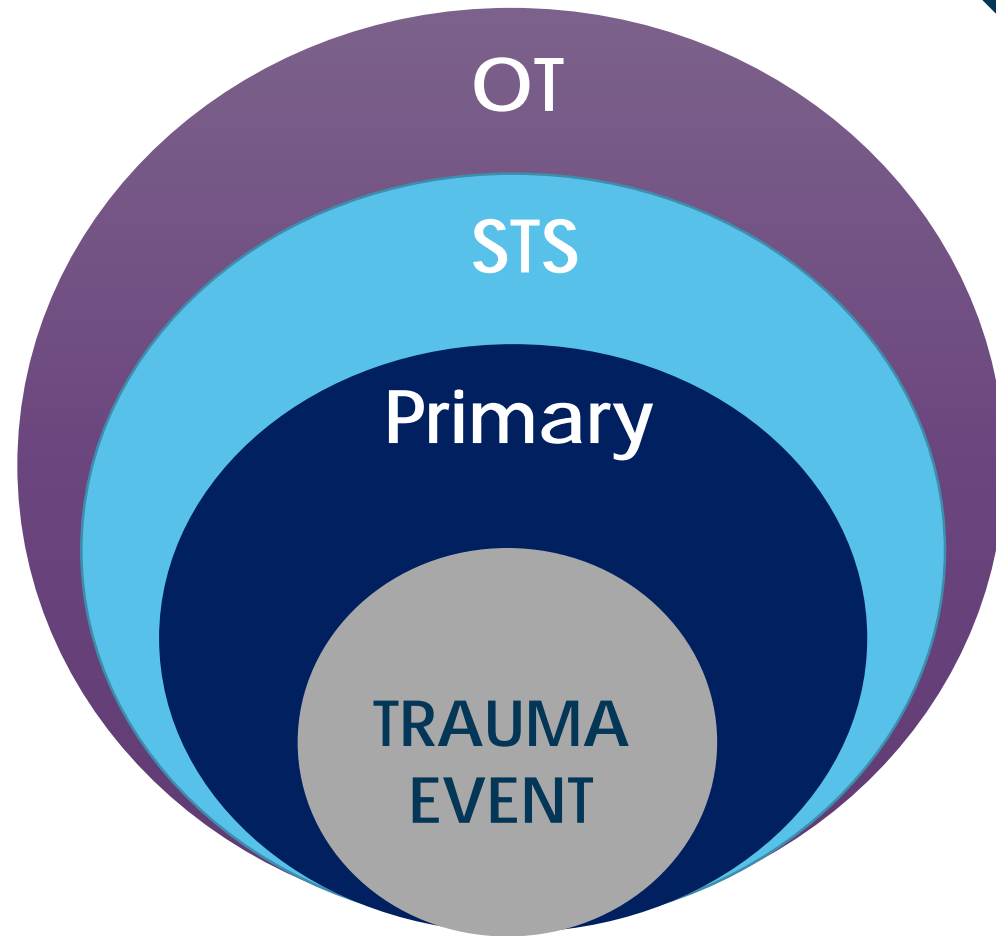
"the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person"
(Figley, 1999, p. 10)

STS, Burnout, Compassion Fatigue are separate constructs

Organizational Trauma

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Primary Trauma Victim



DEFINITION OF TERMS


| Symptom Group | Requirement | Criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Avoidance | Individual must show signs of least one criteria. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoidance of or efforts to avoid distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s) Avoidance of or efforts to avoid external reminders (people, places, conversations, activities, objects, situations) that arouse distressing memories, thoughts, or feelings about or closely associated with the traumatic event(s) |
| Negative Change in Cognition and Mood | Individual must show signs of least two criteria. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inability to remember an important aspect of the traumatic event(s) Persistent and exaggerated negative beliefs or expectations about oneself, others, or the world Persistent, distorted cognitions about the cause or consequences of the traumatic event(s) that lead the individual to blame themselves or others Persistent negative emotional state Markedly diminished interest or participation in significant activities Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others Persistent inability to experience positive emotions |
| Change in Arousal and Reactivity | Individual must show signs of least two criteria. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Irritable behavior and angry outbursts (with little or no provocation) typically expressed as verbal or physical aggression toward people or objects Reckless or self-destructive behavior Hypervigilance Exaggerated startle response Problems with concentration Sleep disturbance |
| Intrusion | Individual must show signs of at least one criteria. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s) Recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/or effect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s) Dissociative reactions (flashbacks) in which the individual feels or acts as if the traumatic event(s) were recurring. Intense or prolonged psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event. Marked physiological reactions to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event(s) |

Statement of the Problem

Historically, college student affairs personnel have played a crucial role in student development, support, and success. Today, these professionals have found themselves increasingly acting in the capacity of first responders for various student crises. Literature in other helping professions such as social work, K-12 education, and counseling all indicate that repeated or extreme exposure to traumatic events, or details of traumatic events, can have a significant negative impact on the well-being of professional helpers. Currently, literature centered on individuals working in college student affairs does not directly address the issue of secondary traumatic stress. It is the aim of this study to explore the impact of trauma-support work on student affairs professionals by exploring this phenomenon through the lived experiences of professionals who have supported students who have experienced trauma.

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Research Questions



Question 1. How does secondary traumatic stress manifest in student affairs professionals who work with U.S. college students experiencing trauma?

Question 2. What impact does working with U.S. college students experiencing trauma have on student affairs professionals?

Question 3. How do student affairs professionals, working with U.S. college students experiencing trauma, make meaning of their experience?



Summary of Methods

Pilot Study (DeVellis 2011): Secondary Trauma in SAP Scale (Lynch & Glass 2018)

- Developed instrument measuring magnitude of STS symptomology
- Roughly 900 Responses from across the country, all functional areas, and all career levels
- Recruited 30 participants using criterion sampling from dataset

Phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994)

- “[determining] what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive experience of it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13).
- Describing the “essence” of secondary trauma
- Phenomenological Reduction & Imaginative Variation
- 30, one to two hour interviews via WebEx, phone, and in-person

Art-Based Research (McNiff, 2008)

- Emerging methodology that addresses communication & power dynamics
- Contributes to triangulation
- Visual Representation of Trauma Support (Experience, Emotions, & Meaning)

Findings

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Co-Researcher Characteristics (N=30)

| Category | N | Category | N | Category | N | Category | N |
|-------------------------|-----------|--|-----------|--|-----------|-------------------------|-----------|
| Racial Identity | | Degree Type | | Current Functional Area | | Institution Type | |
| White | 23 | Higher Education or Student Affairs | 16 | Housing & Residential Life Programs | 8 | Public | 22 |
| Biracial or Multiracial | 3 | Education | 2 | Campus Activities Programs | 6 | Private | 7 |
| Asian | 1 | Counseling | 2 | Sexual Violence-Related Programs & Services | 2 | Did not disclose | 1 |
| Black | 1 | Other | 5 | Health Promotion Services | 2 | | |
| Mestiza | 1 | Did not disclose | 5 | LGBT Programs & Services | 2 | | |
| | | | | Leadership & Civic Engagement Programs | 2 | | |
| Gender Identity | | Highest Degree Earned | | Senior Administrator | 2 | | |
| Female | 19 | Bachelors | 3 | Academic Advising Programs | 1 | | |
| Male | 10 | Masters | 23 | Career Services | 1 | | |
| Genderqueer | 1 | Doctorate | 4 | Faculty | 1 | | |
| | | | | Graduate & Professional Student Services | 1 | | |
| Sexuality | | Current U.S. Region | | International Student Programs & Services | 1 | | |
| Straight | 17 | Northeast | 10 | Student Conduct | 1 | | |
| Queer | 5 | South | 10 | | | | |
| Bisexual | 4 | West | 4 | Career Level | | | |
| Lesbian | 1 | Midwest | 4 | Assistantship | 3 | | |
| Fluid | 1 | Southwest | 2 | New Professional | 11 | | |
| Did not disclose | 2 | | | Mid-level | 11 | | |
| | | | | Senior-level or VPSA | 4 | | |
| | | | | Faculty | 1 | | |

| META-THEMES RESULTING FROM COMPOSITE & TEXTURAL DESCRIPTIONS | DESCRIPTION |
|--|--|
| Theme 1: The cumulative nature of trauma support in higher education | Theme 1 speaks to the experience of many co-researchers who described how their support of college students experiencing trauma was not limited to occasional isolated occurrences. Instead, they describe their support as repetitive, and in some cases almost constant. |
| Theme 2: Inadequate professional preparation, resources, and guidance | Theme 2 summarizes co-researcher stories of feeling underprepared to serve students experiencing trauma, particularly as it relates to graduate preparation programs and job on-boarding. |
| Theme 3: Professional's self-efficacy as an effective support-person | Theme 3 illustrates beliefs that co-researchers held in regard to their ability to support students through trauma,, as well as their ability to process their support in healthy ways. |
| Theme 4: Impact of professional and organizational culture on the development of maladaptive views of student support | Theme 4 describes how the profession of college student affairs, or individual organizations, perpetuates maladaptive coping mechanisms when student affairs manage student trauma support. |
| Theme 5: Importance of personal and professional support networks | Theme 5 highlights co-researcher experiences that indicate how they experienced, or did not experience, support both personally and professionally, and how this support bolstered their ability to manage their support of students. |
| Theme 6: Personal impact of professional's relationship with student(s) in crisis | Theme 6 demonstrates how co-researcher relationships with students experiencing trauma exacerbated or mitigated their experience of secondary traumatic stress. |
| Theme 7: The negative impact of support-work on personal well-being | Theme 7 illustrates how supporting students through trauma may manifest in physical and psychological symptoms for the co-researchers. |

Theme: Self-efficacy in regard to trauma-support work



Photo Credit, "Margaret"

"What I've learned about myself is I don't have a really good perspective on where these boundaries are for me being emotionally available, compassionate, empathetic, and allowing myself to take on too much responsibility or too much contagion from this trauma... I don't know if it's good when I'm hearing a student tell me their life story, and they're doing it in a dispassionate way, to tear up and a tear run down my cheek. I don't know if that's appropriate or inappropriate... I don't know how much of my family to neglect and my marriage to neglect, or other aspects of my job to neglect to help the student navigate their trauma. So I've learned that I don't have a good bearing on that..." ~Matt (Senior Level-Leadership & Civic Engagement)

Theme: Importance of personal and professional support networks

"I think sometimes we're carrying the same rock, I don't know if we always pass it. I think sometimes we carry it together so the weight isn't as much. So I think that that helps. Especially when you're in it, right? My husband is a lieutenant in the fire department...I think [his profession] is a similar concept except way more intense...They just have an understanding of what their world is and how they can talk about it...I think that while it's a different way of doing that within our field, I do think that we have an understanding of what it means to work in this field, whether you are in one functional area or the other, we're all here for our students. So I do think a lot of the support does come from each other...it's us carrying the same rock." Clarissa (Mid-Level-Campus Activities)



"Photo Credit: Elizabeth"

Theme: Student affairs professional culture fostering maladaptive views of student support

"[This interview] was almost therapeutic in a way to be honest. I feel like in this field there's not much discussion on the effects of constantly being on-call for a professional, whether that's res life or any other student affairs department. So, we're expected to be unconditionally supportive to our students, which is a very noble thing, but we're not reflective on how that hurts us every now and then, and then how to deal with that. So being able to actually tell someone about that was actually a very therapeutic experience and I thank you for it." ~Jose (Graduate Assistant-Residence Life)



Photo Credit, "Angie"

Theme: The impact of trauma support work on personal well-being

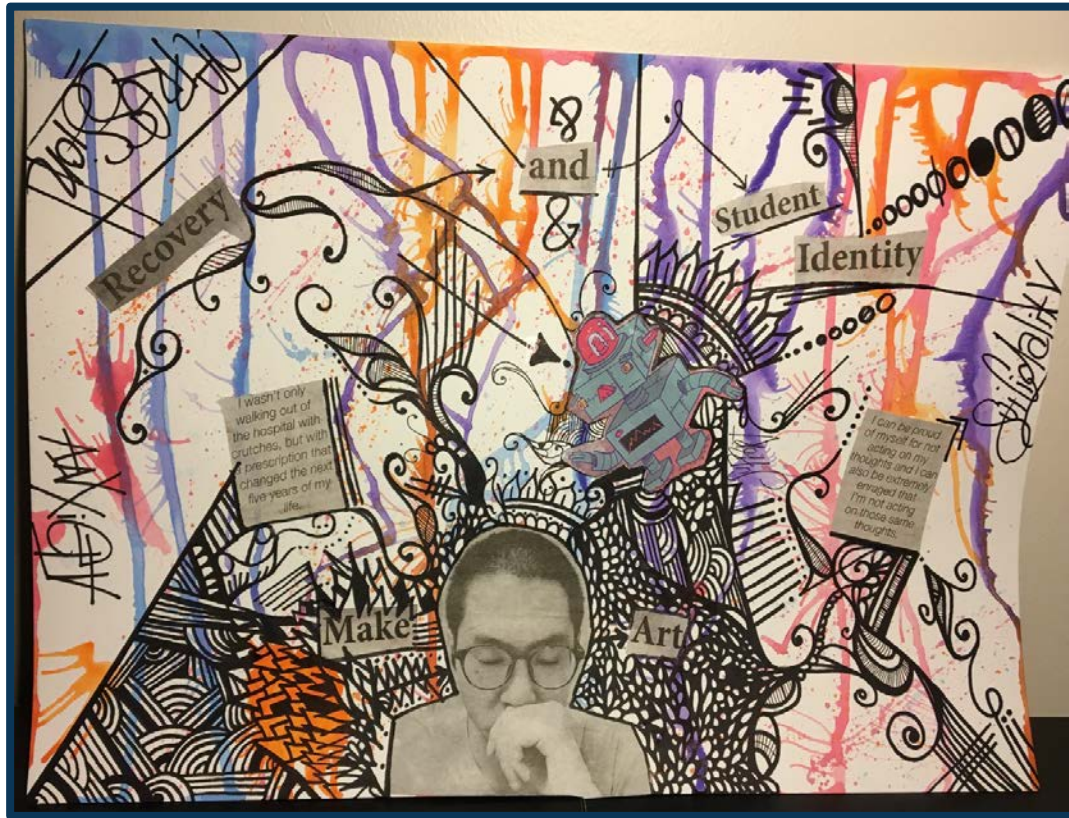


Photo Credit: "Xavier"

"My job was making me physically sick. I was on medication for high blood pressure. I had an old shoulder injury, and I had surgery, and I was in constant pain." Monica (New Professional-Sexual Violence Related Programs & Services)

"The biggest thing was leaving housing. My weight stabilized. I stopped having migraines. I stopped having acne breakouts. It was like all these physical changes manifested themselves within the first six months of me leaving. So physically I feel better, and when that happens, stress levels go down." Sophia (New Professional-Residence Life)



Question 1. What impact does working with U.S. college students experiencing trauma have on student affairs professionals?

Question 2. How does secondary traumatic stress manifest in student affairs professionals who work with U.S. college students experiencing trauma?

Question 3. How do student affairs professionals, working with U.S. college students experiencing trauma, make meaning of their experience?

Connection to Research Questions

| Question 1 | Question 2 | Question 3 |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Impact (What)</p> | <p>Manifestation (How)</p> | <p>Meaning Making</p> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional & Psychological Distress • Decreased self-efficacy • Unrealistic expectations • Negative physical reactions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of training and academic preparation • Magnitude and frequency of trauma support • Lack of professional support systems • Lack of time and attention to personal reflection & processing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued belief in purpose and contribution of student affairs work • Post-Traumatic Growth • Focus on Sphere of Influence • Lack of personal reflection |

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Implications

Practical Implications

- **Department & University Leaders**

- Supervision
- Human Resources
- Intentional opportunities for processing

- **Graduate & Professional Preparation**

- Curricular Changes
- Social Work
- Redevelopment of assistantship practices

- **Considerations for the Student Affairs Profession**

- Professional Competency
- Conferences, institutes, retreats, and continuing education credits
- National conversation among university leaders and policy makers



Photo Credit, "Matt"

Theoretical Implications

- **Population Studies**
 - At-Risk Populations
 - Departmental & Organizational Studies
 - Resident Assistants & Peer Mentors
- **Extending Understanding**
 - Longitudinal
 - Comparative Interventions
 - Impact on student affairs work
- **Interdisciplinary Perspectives**
 - Spirituality & Meaning Making
 - Organizational Theory
 - Trauma Informed Pedagogy

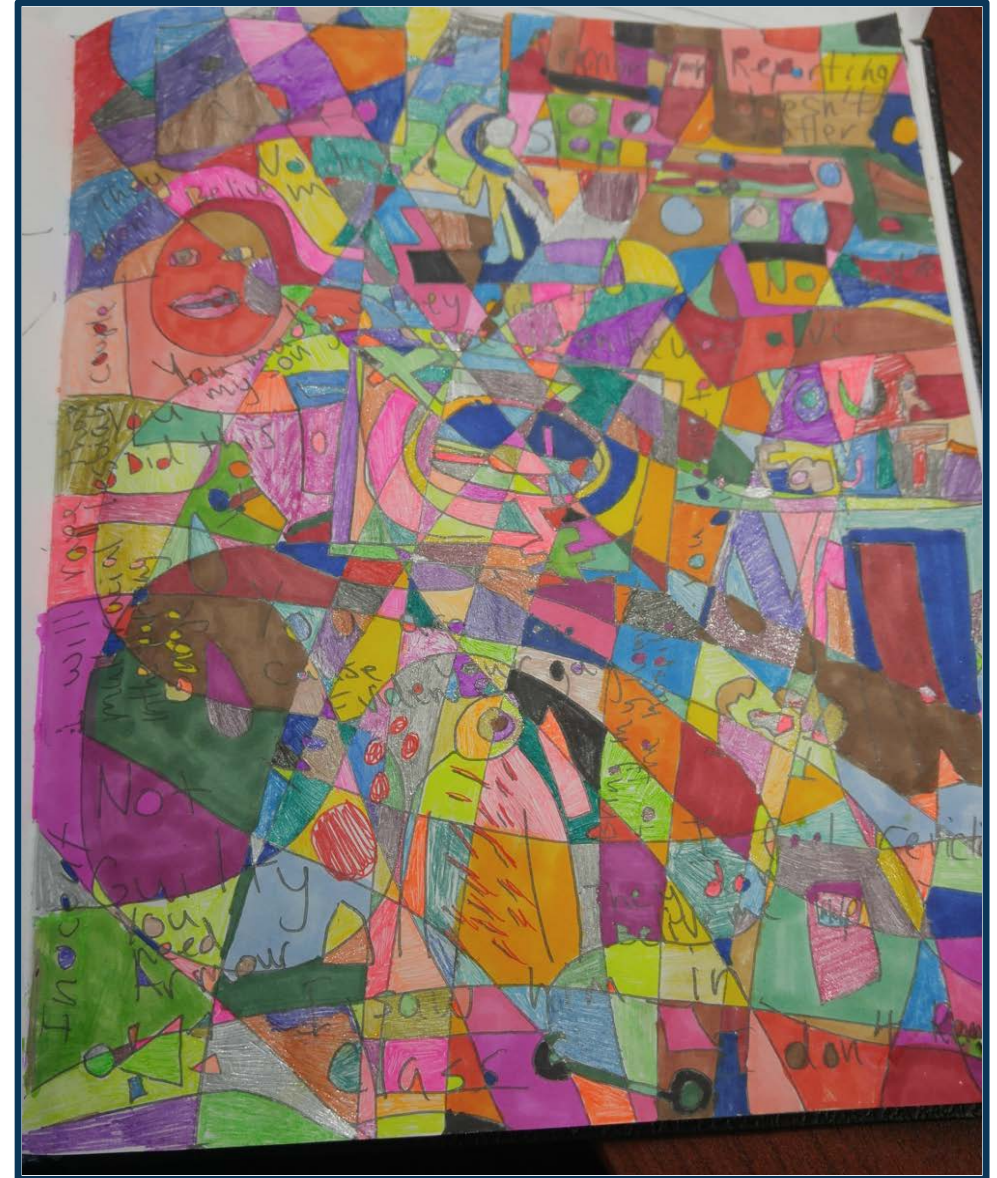


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Limitations

Limitations



Photo Credit, "Bonnie"

- Generalizability
- Subjectivity of co-researcher experiences
- No diagnosis of co-researchers
- Researcher bias
- Technological issues
- Timing of study

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Thank You!
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