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## Stress and the Child Welfare Workforce: Recognizing Signs of Secondary Traumatic Stress

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## Stress and the Child Welfare Workforce: Recognizing Signs of Secondary Traumatic Stress (Blog Post)

Posted on July 2, 2018

Child welfare workers are exposed to a variety of stressors in their everyday work. These stressors can come from:

1. Direct traumatic events – Murder, threats on the lives of workers or their family members, name calling, cursing, shouting, assaults, dog attacks, and property damage.
2. Secondary traumatic events – Exposure to the perpetrators or the victims and survivors of trauma (e.g., children who are abused, neglected, abandoned, and killed, battered women, victims of crime, survivors of natural disasters).
3. Organizational environments – Bureaucratic rules, paperwork, work overload, role confusion, high demands with low resources, high levels of office politics, unfair practices, and other forms of negative organizational culture and climate ([Bride, 2007](#)).

The typical stress response is to go into survival mode, also known as the “fight, flight or freeze” instinct. Survival mode is extremely useful in emergencies because it quickly takes over all other functions in order to help protect us from the perceived threat. However, in non-emergency situations, survival mode can be harmful to the worker. Survival mode can be switched on when one is working in a crisis-driven environment and it can be difficult to switch off. This can take a toll on a person’s body and mind.

What does survival mode look like? There are a variety of symptoms to look for:

Physical Symptoms	Emotional Symptoms	Cognitive Symptoms	Social Symptoms
✓ Increased heart rate	✓ Being overwhelmed	✓ Heightened awareness of outside threats	✓ Withdrawal and isolation
✓ Shallow Breathing	✓ Not feeling in control	✓ Reduction in self-monitoring	✓ Avoidance of others
✓ Sweating	✓ Having intense negative feelings	✓ Inflexibility	✓ Irritability
✓ Stomach aches	✓ Emotional numbing	✓ Negative, pessimistic thinking	✓ Outbursts when triggered
✓ Headaches	✓ Avoiding intimacy		
✓ Tightening of the muscles	✓ Mood swings		
✓ Fatigue			
✓ Immune suppression			
✓ Sleep problems			

Child welfare workers and supervisors can become aware of, monitor, and control the activation of survival mode when they are under a lot of stress. Watch for activities that initiate the symptoms listed above and monitor how you feel when this happens. Increased awareness of how work-related stress impacts your physical, mental, and social behaviors can alert you when your body is in survival mode.