

# Burnout in domestic violence and sexual assault organizations



## Why does it matter?

Domestic violence, intimate partner violence, and sexual assault advocates are exposed to violence from clients and projects; they also bring their own personal histories to their work and face unique workplace challenges.

Domestic violence and sexual assault advocates are exposed to the immediate and long-term effects of trauma, have demanding workloads, and work with limited resources (Voth Schrag et al., 2021)

**68%** of domestic violence workers report their own personal or witnessed experiences with domestic violence (Milaney et al., 2021)



## Terminology

<b>Burnout</b>	Emotional detachment and exhaustion resulting from a demanding work environment. Burnout often contributes to traumatic stress, physical and mental health problems, lower productivity, and compassion fatigue (Benuto et al., 2019)
<b>Secondary traumatic stress</b>	Advocates who are constantly exposed to traumatic events or disturbing experiences can experience psychological and physical responses such as nightmares, sleeplessness, fatigue, fear, or hypervigilance (Benuto et al., 2019)
<b>Compassion fatigue</b>	Mental and physical exhaustion and stress resulting from burnout and secondary traumatic stress, associated with difficulties such as missed work, retention of staff, and lower organizational effectiveness (Voth Schrag et al, 2021)
<b>Vicarious trauma</b>	The effects of hearing about experiences of trauma and working with survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault (Office for Victims of Crime, n.d.; Milany et al., 2021), including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Post-traumatic or secondary stress symptoms</li><li>• Reduced emotional well-being, fatigue, or physical symptoms</li><li>• Changes in worldview</li></ul>

# Prevention and intervention strategies



## Individuals

- **Resilience training:** Support recognition of the positive effects of witnessing survivor recovery, such as increased hopefulness and resilience, to reduce burnout (Cocker & Joss, 2016; Scott et al., 2023).
- **Practice workplace compassion:** Recognizing burnout and trauma symptoms within yourself and among colleagues is important in creating a trauma-informed workplace culture (Office for Victims of Crime, n.d.)
- **Incorporate self-care tools:** Consider using some of the following tactics (Cocker & Joss, 2016) in the work week:



Structured meditation or mindfulness



Guided imaging with music



Self-regulation strategies, such as muscle relaxation techniques

## Organizations

- Offer group or individual training on burnout and resilience (Milaney et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022)
- Provide access to wellness breaks or structured mindfulness sessions during the workday. Doing so can reduce burnout and foster resilience (Scott et al., 2023). This may include research-supported burnout prevention and response including (Esperança, Ferreira, & Costa, 2025):



Mindfulness apps and tools



Yoga



Auricular (ear) acupuncture or acupressure

- Build connection through group activities like drumming, poetry, or communal workplace rituals to support resilience among advocates (Kim et al., 2022; Scott et al., 2023)
- Offer cash bonuses, sabbaticals, and professional development opportunities to prevent burnout and promote retention (Haynes, 2023)

Contact [researchandevaluation@esperanzaunited.org](mailto:researchandevaluation@esperanzaunited.org) for additional tools and resources on burnout.

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