

ABSTRACT
UNDERSTANDING FOSTER PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF
SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

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Secondary traumatic stress, which has been studied across many helping professions, refers to symptoms similar to posttraumatic stress disorder which an individual may develop as a result of indirect exposure to another individual's trauma (Sprang et al., 2019). Foster parents may be particularly susceptible to developing secondary traumatic stress due to their exposure to their foster child's trauma history and trauma symptoms, which has been confirmed in recent studies (Bridger et al., 2020; Whitt-Woosley et al., 2020). Importantly, foster parents' experiences of secondary traumatic stress may differ from those of other helping professionals given their unique role. The purpose of the present study was to develop an in-depth understanding of foster parents' experiences of secondary traumatic stress through the use of qualitative interviews. The sample included fourteen foster parents who had fostered a child with trauma and experienced symptoms of secondary traumatic stress within the last year. Data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR).

Findings suggest that participants were experiencing significant secondary traumatic stress symptoms in the domains of intrusion, avoidance, alterations in mood and cognition, and alterations in arousal and reactivity. Concerningly, negative impacts from secondary traumatic stress were identified by participants across different areas of their life, including work, self-care, and relationships. Participants' parenting of their foster child was also negatively impacted, as participants described experiencing interpersonal difficulties with their foster child, wanting to stop trying to parent their child, and feeling like they were not being a good parent. While most participants planned to continue engaging as a foster parent after this experience, participants also shared that they stopped or reduced their fostering, were unsure about future fostering, or planned to be more selective about future placements. Factors that were helpful and challenging as they managed this experience were also discussed by participants. Unfortunately, most participants indicated that secondary traumatic stress was not adequately addressed by the child welfare system. Findings also include participants' recommendations for ways that the child welfare system could better support foster parents experiencing secondary traumatic stress. Additionally, limitations, implications, and directions for future research are discussed.