

## Recognizing and Helping the Nurse “Second Victim”

Adapted from Scott, S, Hirschinger, L and Cox, K. (2008). Sharing the load of a nurse “second victim”. RNWeb, 71(12): 38-43

### Common Second Victim Physical Symptoms

- Uncontrolled crying/shaking
- Increased blood pressure
- Extreme fatigue/exhaustion
- Abdominal discomfort
- Sleep Disturbances
- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea
- Muscle tension
- Headaches

### Key Phrases that indicate coping difficulty:

- “...sickening realization of what has happened.”
- “This will alter the way I work from now on.”
- “I don’t deserve to be a nurse.”
- “This has been a career-changing event for me.
- “This event shook me to the core. I’ll never be the same.”
- “This is a turning point in my career.”
- Other phrases post critical events...

### Key Actions for Supporting Individual Peer/colleagues

- “Be there”-Practice active listening skills and allow the second victim to share his or her story. Offer support as you deem appropriate
- If you have experience with an adverse event or bad patient outcome yourself, share it. “War stories” are powerful healing words.
- If you don’t have experience with an adverse event or bad patient outcome, be supportive and predict the victim’s needs.
- Avoid condemnation without knowing the story—It could have been you!
- Let your peer know that you still have faith in his or her abilities, and that he or she is a trusted member of you unit.
- Determine a way that you can make an individual difference.

### Common Second Victim Psychosocial Symptoms

- Extreme guilt, grief
- Repetitive, intrusive memories
- Difficulty concentrating
- Loss of confidence, self doubt
- Return to work anxiety
- Frustration, anger, depression
- Second-guessing career
- Fear of damage to professional life
- Excessive excitability
- Avoidance of patient care areas

### Key Words to Stimulate Conversation with Second Victims

- “Are you OK?”
- “I’ll help you work through this.”
- “You are a good nurse working in a very complex environment.”
- “I believe in you.”
- “I’m glad that we work together.”
- “Please call me if you would like to talk about it again.”
- “I can’t imagine what that must have been like for you. Can we talk about it?”
- “I’m here if you want to talk.”

### Key Actions for Department Leaders

- Talk with the employee as soon as you become aware of the incident
- Reaffirm your confidence in him or her as a staff member
- Consider calling in flex staff to allow time to compose thoughts, prepare if an investigation is anticipated
- Keep the second victim informed of likely next steps in the event of an investigation
- Check on second victim regularly
- Be visible to all staff; physical presence during post-event helps decrease anxiety and shows accessibility