

Key Information about Secondary Wounding

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What is a victim? According to the American Heritage Dictionary (1998), a victim is someone who is physically harmed, killed, or otherwise made to suffer by another person, circumstance, agency, or condition.

Three levels of victimization: Trauma victims/survivors can be subject to three levels of victimization:

1. The traumatic event itself
2. Internalizing the widespread view of victims as ineffective or disempowered second class citizens
3. Secondary or societal wounding experiences

What is Secondary Wounding?

Secondary wounding occurs when the people, institutions, and others to whom the trauma survivor turns for emotional, legal, financial, medical, or other assistance respond in one of the following ways:

1. Disbelief, denial, discounting or otherwise minimizing the magnitude of the event, its meaning to the victim, or its impact on the victim's life
2. Blaming victims for their own pain
3. Stigmatization or judging the victim negatively for having normal reactions to the traumatic event or for any long-term symptoms he or she may suffer
4. Denial of assistance or expected services on the grounds that a victim does not need or is not entitled such services
5. Cruelty

Some of the Causes of Secondary Wounding

1. A person's fear of facing the negative side of life: that is, death, loss, unjust suffering
2. Overprotected life
3. Ignorance: Sheer ignorance

4. Burn-out: family members, friends, and other caregivers (medical staff, government workers, etc.) may find themselves becoming increasingly numb, alienated, and detached.

5. “Just world” philosophy

According to this wide-spread belief, “The world is just and fair. You get what you deserve and deserve what you get.” Hence the trauma is viewed as a punishment for the victim’s inadequacies or misbehaviors.

6. Culture of Stoicism: Grin and bear anything lest you be seen as weak or as morally or personally deficient

7. A person’s own unprocessed trauma

8. Evil/Sadism

Examples of Secondary Wounding

1. Disbelief, denial, discounting or otherwise minimizing the magnitude of the event, its meaning to the victim, or its impact on the victim’s life

Case of Sandra: After a hurricane, Sandra, a violinist, was taken to a makeshift hospital. When she was told that three of her fingers needed to be amputated, she began to cry.

“Hush now, you big crybaby,” the nurse snapped. “Look around you. Bed #1 lost his arm, and Bed #2 has to have both legs removed. Count your blessings, and don’t upset the others.”

Case of Carl: After nearly drowning in a flood, Carl went to a doctor for the “shakes.” “I’ve been shaking for two months, ever since that flood washed away my . . .”

“Come on now, Carl,” the doctor broke in, “That flood wasn’t that bad. Only a few people died and less than a hundred homes were destroyed. When I was a boy, I was in a flood that wiped out half the town. Now that was a *real* flood.”

2. Blaming the victim

Case of Howard: After Howard’s office was burglarized, he took a second job to pay for the repairs. When he complained about how tired and upset he was, his wife commented, “Didn’t I tell you not to open an office in that neighborhood? The least you could have done was buy more insurance.”

Case of Penny: Penny, an incest survivor, was in a car accident which left her flat on her back for a year. Her family decided that the accident was a form of divine punishment for Penny having had enjoyed the incestuous sex.

Case of Ross: Ross, a Marine, lost an arm during a training accident. Later on, at a family

reunion, a cousin Ross hadn't seen since childhood sneered at him and said, "So you're a lefty now, eh? I guess that's what you get for enlisting."

3. Stigmatization can include the following:

a. Ridicule of, or condescension towards, the survivor

Case of Victor: Victor, a combat veteran, sometimes fell to the floor when he heard loud or unexpected noises. His co-workers called him "Shelly" (for "shell shock") and purposely came up behind him and made unexpected, loud noises to frighten him.

b. Interpretation of the survivor's psychological distress as a sign of deep psychological problems or moral or mental deficiency or otherwise giving the survivor's PTSD symptoms negative, pejorative labels

c. An implication or outright statement that the survivor's symptoms reflect his or her desire for financial gain, attention, or unwarranted sympathy

4. Denial of Justice: Punishment of the victim (rather than the offender); denial of assistance or expected services on the grounds that victims do not need or are not entitled to such services

Case of Tasha: After being gang raped by three men, Tasha filed charges against them. But after a jury declared them innocent, the three men filed charges against Tasha on grounds that she had made a false police report. Tasha was found guilty and then penalized.

Case of Alvin: Alvin, a bus driver, lost his right leg in a bus accident that was caused by the bus company's failure to comply with safety regulations. When Alvin sought compensation from the bus company, he was told to wait and see if his leg would "get better." After presenting medical documentation showing that it would not, Alvin's request was again denied.

Why? Because despite his disability, he had found gainful employment.

Four years later, with the help of an attorney, Alvin was granted compensation. However, he was awarded neither attorney fees, nor payment for the four years he had to struggle to obtain the benefits he was entitled to per his contract with the bus company.

5. Generalizing. One of the social consequences of being victimized is being labeled as a victim. Once you are labeled as such there is a tendency for others to view you and interpret most, if not all, of your emotions and behavior in light of that label.

Case of the Deaf: Research has shown that the deaf are often assumed to also be blind or mentally slow.

Case of Roger: Roger lost an eye in a chemical explosion at work. Otherwise, he was not injured, and could see quite well with his other eye. But when he returned to his job he was

offered a wheelchair and told that his company did not employ “cripples.”

Case of Julia: Julia suffered an acute PTSD reaction (i.e., her symptoms lasted less than one month). Yet some people assumed that because of her temporary reaction, that she was severely emotionally scarred and forever would be.

Case of Maria: Maria, a dental hygienist, confided to her employer that she was seeking counseling for having been mugged. Without taking into account Maria’s actual job performance, he immediately replied, “That’s fine. You can take the receptionist’s job. She’s leaving us anyway,” thereby implying that being a victim of crime automatically meant that Maria’s work skills were now significantly impaired.

6. Cruelty

Most secondary wounding experiences **feel** cruel. Therefore it is hard to assess whether the other person intended to cause pain or whether the wounding was caused by ignorance, generalization, or some other secondary wounding process. In some cases, a mixture of cruelty and some other process is at work.