



Portfolio Media, Inc. | 111 West 19th Street, 5th floor | New York, NY 10011 | www.law360.com

Phone: +1 646 783 7100 | Fax: +1 646 783 7161 | customerservice@law360.com

Many Judges Haunted By Graphic Courtroom Images

By **Aebra Coe**

Law360, Grand Rapids (October 24, 2017, 5:20 PM EDT) -- Nearly half of judges say they have experienced secondary traumatic stress — emotional duress as a result of hearing about another's trauma — due to the sometimes graphic and devastating images and testimony they confront in court, according to a report released Tuesday by the National Judicial College.

In a survey, NJC asked, "Have you suffered secondary traumatic stress from being a judge?" Out of about 800 respondents, 340, or 44.7 percent, said they had, and many provided examples of how the stress had negatively impacted their lives.

"I will be out running, and suddenly I see the burned-off face of a 5-year-old child in my head, and it won't go away," one judge wrote anonymously.

In the survey, secondary traumatic stress, or STS, was defined as emotional duress when hearing about the firsthand trauma experience of another. The condition has also been called vicarious traumatization or compassion fatigue. Its effects have been linked to professions that work with trauma victims, such as therapists or human services workers.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, symptoms of STS include hopelessness, survival coping, anger and cynicism, sleeplessness or chronic exhaustion, physical ailments and illness, guilt, avoidance and diminished self-care.

Monica Miller, a professor in the criminal justice and interdisciplinary social psychology doctoral program at the University of Nevada, Reno, said that STS among judges is "completely natural" given the content of the topics they review in the course of their work.

And, she said, the percentage of judges affected by the condition could actually be higher than the 45 percent found in the survey, "because some judges may not be able to recognize when they have symptoms of secondary traumatic stress, and some don't want to admit it."

Many of the judges who reported symptoms of STS and left comments on the survey said they preside over child-abuse cases or cases involving violent crimes, such as murder or sexual assault.

"Unfortunately, we are not able to unhear or unsee the things we see and hear in the courtroom," one judge commented. "There is no button to turn off the effects of this when you go to bed at night."

Another said it's "nearly impossible" to get autopsy photos of a small child out of their head. A third judge mentioned suffering STS following a case involving the murder of a small child, who was drowned in order to collect life insurance proceeds.

One judge who oversaw criminal cases for nearly 30 years recalled being taken to the emergency room after court one day with blood pressure that was "astronomical." The symptoms abated, the judge said, within six months of transferring from criminal to civil court.

The comments were not entirely bereft of hope. Many judges commented on the ways they've learned to cope with secondhand trauma.

One judge said he or she avoids reading any deeper into petitions for protections from child abuse than is necessary for the allegations to meet the requirements for protection. Others mentioned coping mechanisms such as biking home from work, hiking, yoga, reading and mindfulness.

--Editing by Marygrace Murphy.

All Content © 2003-2017, Portfolio Media, Inc.

https://www.law360.com/immigration/articles/977837?utm_source=shared-articles&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=shared-articles
