

INVESTIGATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EXPOSURE TO SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS AND ATTITUDES TOWARD SEEKING PSYCHOLOGICAL HELP AMONG EMERGENCY PHYSICIANS IN ISTANBUL

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BACKGROUND AND AIM: Secondary traumatic stress (STS) is caused by indirect exposure to trauma through witnessing others' experiences or repeated occupational exposure to trauma narratives and is associated with adverse psychological outcomes. This study aimed to assess STS among emergency physicians and examine its relationship with attitudes toward seeking psychological help.

METHODS: This cross-sectional study was conducted between 2nd and 10th of June 2022, among physicians in nine emergency departments in Istanbul. Data were collected via an online questionnaire using convenience sampling and included sociodemographic items; the Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale (STSS) and the Attitudes Toward Seeking Psychological Help Scale–Short Form (ATSPH-SF). Ethical approval was obtained from the Istanbul Medipol University Non-Interventional Clinical Research Ethics Committee (Decision No: 10840098-772.02-3336).

RESULTS: Seventy emergency physicians participated. 54.3% were female, mean age 28.4 ± 4.5 years. Most had 0–4 years of experience (80.0%). A history of traumatic events was reported

by 55.7%, most commonly emotional or physical abuse (20.0%). Most (74.3%) had no psychiatric diagnosis; 48.6% had never received psychological support. Based on STSS scores, 58.6% showed severe STS (49–85). Favorable help-seeking attitudes were present in 51.4%. STSS scores were higher in women ($p = 0.029$) and differed by trauma type ($p = 0.025$), with higher scores measured among those exposed to traumatic accidents. No correlation was found between STSS and ATSPH-SF ($r = 0.144$, $p = 0.255$).

CONCLUSION: Despite severe STS levels, no association was found between STS and help-seeking attitudes, suggesting individual and institutional factors influence help-seeking behavior. Further research is needed to clarify this gap and identify barriers to physicians' psychological help-seeking. As the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, marked by intense workload and frequent exposure to suffering and death, findings should be interpreted within this context, underscoring the importance of context-sensitive preventive interventions.

Keywords: Secondary traumatic stress, trauma exposure, seeking professional psychological help, emergency physicians