Addressing Collective Trauma from COVID-19: Integrating Trauma-Informed Practices in the Workplace

Presented by Thrive in Your Workplace and NYC Service
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  o We will hold dedicated time for Q&A at the end of the training

• Be respectful and civil

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Thrive in Your Workplace (TWP) helps local employers integrate mental health support in the workplace to:

• Promote employees’ emotional wellbeing
• Facilitate access to mental healthcare
• Create cultures of positive mental health at work

We work with employers from across sectors to shape customized workplace mental health strategies and implement workplace mental health programming. We also offer free training, resources and events to support the resilience of New York City’s workforce.
Rachael Steimnitz, MPH, is a public health professional who helps organizations develop and implement health improvement programs. She currently leads content development and implementation for Thrive in Your Workplace, working closely with employers across New York City. Previously, she supported various quality initiatives for Health and Hospitals Corporation (H+H) and directed trainings and programs at the State Office of Mental Health. Rachael has a BA from the New School and a Master’s in Public Health in Sociomedical Sciences from the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University.
Chris Lynn-Logue, MSW, is a social worker and mental health advocate. He currently works at the Mayor’s Office of ThriveNYC as the Employer Engagement Manager for Thrive in Your Workplace. Before working for ThriveNYC, he worked at the Department of Youth and Community Development as a Program Manager for Cornerstone Programs. In that capacity, he managed community centers located in NYCHA public housing developments. In addition to his work with community centers, Chris has also worked with the Mayor’s Youth Leadership Council, the Young Men’s Initiative, and other youth-related initiatives. Christopher earned his Master’s in Social Work from New York University’s Silver School of Social Work and his Bachelor's Degree in Sociology from Morehouse College.
Agenda

• Overview of COVID-19 and mental health

• Impact of collective trauma and emotional responses

• Organizational strategies to integrate trauma-informed practices into your workplace and volunteer programming

• Q & A
Understanding the mental health spectrum

**Mental health** is a state of wellbeing in which people can cope with the normal stressors of life, work productively, and contribute to their communities.

**Mental health problems** is a broad term that recognizes that mental health is a spectrum and we all experience mental health challenges.
- E.g. daily stress or stress related to COVID-19, anxiety related to uncertainty, social isolation and loneliness, or grief.

**Mental illnesses** are conditions in which people’s thinking, mood and behaviors negatively affect their day-to-day functioning.
- E.g. depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, and others, as well as addictions.
Mental health challenges affect all of us in different ways

In New York City:

• 1 in 5 adults struggle with mental illness every year

• Suicide is the sixth leading cause of death

• Over half a million adult New Yorkers are estimated to have depression, yet less than 40% report receiving care for it

• Mood disorders are the 3rd most common cause of hospitalization for both youth and adults age 18-44
Impact of COVID-19 on workers’ mental health

As the workplaces move to re-open, mental health concerns are prevalent:

• 85% of workers feel "worried and anxious they may catch COVID-19”

• 85% are also "worried and anxious they may lose their jobs"

• 84% of American workers report "really struggling" with employment-related matters. The reasons include mental health (37%), changes at work (27%), and managing money at home (23%)
COVID-19 inequities disproportionately affect colleagues of color

- Communities of color are experiencing disproportionate job loss

- In NYC, frontline workers are disproportionately people of color, making up 75% of essential workers
  - Being an essential worker increases exposure and infection risk

- People of color are less likely to work in industries or have jobs that offer sick leave or a work culture that allows time off, as compared to white employees
  - Workers without paid sick leave may be more likely to work when they are sick
Impact of Collective Trauma on Emotional Responses
COVID-19 pandemic: Where are we now?

• The pandemic and encouragement to stay home as much as possible have continued for months

• The public health emergency has spread across the world and to all 50 states

• COVID-19 has triggered the sharpest economic contraction in modern U.S. history as measured by Gross Domestic Product

• In a nationwide survey assessing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, 90% of survey respondents reported experiencing emotional distress
The collective trauma of COVID-19

EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE IN DISASTERS
(and other collective traumas)

- Pre-Disaster
  - Warning
- Impact
- Honeymoon (community cohesion)
- Disillusionment (chronic stress)
- Reconstruction (a new beginning)
- Coming to terms
  - Understanding event and aftermath
  - Anniversary reactions

Time
Event
One Year Mark
Emotional highs
Emotional lows
We may experience different types of trauma

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trauma</th>
<th>Vicarious trauma</th>
<th>Collective trauma</th>
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<td>• Results from an event or series of events experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening</td>
<td>• Results from exposure to traumatic material (stories, details, images, etc.) in someone else’s experience</td>
<td>• Community or social exposure to a large-scale traumatic event or series of events</td>
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<td>• Can lead to long-term adverse effects on physical, social, and emotional well-being</td>
<td>• May lead to similar emotional impact as the direct survivor of the experience</td>
<td>• Can lead to wide-reaching disorientation, helplessness, loss, as well as an increase in questioning related to identity and meaning</td>
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Impact of collective trauma on workplace practices

**Pre-disaster:** Daily meetings with new updates, changing to different shifts, organizations have different responses

**Impact:** Shelter in place order for NYC, many individuals/families are sick, employers scrambling to set up work from home or add safety measures to workplaces

**Heroic/honeymoon:** Town halls, Zoom parties, many informal support opportunities

**Disillusionment:** Work from home continues, virus spread across country, worry about quality of government response
Impact of collective trauma on employees and volunteers

• Fear of returning to work
• Fear of losing a job
• Lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities
• Lack of control
• Increased social isolation
• Interpersonal conflict
• High levels of anxiety
• Burnout
Organizational strategies to address collective trauma
Trauma-informed approaches can reduce or prevent stress responses

Key principles of a trauma-informed response in the workplace and in the field include three elements:

1. Prioritizing physical safety
2. Promoting trust and accountability
3. Facilitating social support
(1) Physical safety in the workplace and in the field

Safe workplaces allow people to show up without fear and may reduce stress responses

Key areas of importance for safe spaces include:

• Social distancing: keep employees at least six feet apart from each other
• Hygiene: ensure robust hygiene protocols, including access to handwashing facilities and hand sanitizer
• Staffing and operations: include safety procedures in operations
• Cleaning and hygiene: incorporate robust cleaning protocols

Note: The City, State, and Federal governments and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continue to update guidance about ensuring a safe return to work
(2) Promoting trust and accountability

- For most people, COVID-19 will be associated with increased uncertainty and stress.

- Organizations can help reduce or mitigate stress responses by communicating with transparency. This can help staff know what to expect and foster a culture of trust.

- Research shows that surprise can increase the intensity of an emotion by 400%, which is why a sudden betrayal can feel particularly devastating or receiving support when you did not expect it can feel so moving.

- Research also shows that for most people most of the time, trust and distrust are developed over time based on small details and interactions.
Trauma informed care practices to guide our work

• Support regulation by including time for practices like breathing, grounding exercises, and movement

• Explain the why behind decisions. Understanding why something (like a policy or practice) is happening can give people a sense of control and decrease a stress response

• Help staff and volunteers know what to expect to the extent possible. In uncertain times, having any amount of certainty or predictability is helpful

• Give people the benefit of the doubt. People may not be showing up as their best selves during this period of fear and chaos

• Prioritize relationships with direct reports and peers to find ways to connect and support each other during stressful times
Accountability

- Crises require us to shift how we apply accountability – not to remove all accountability

- Blame is the inverse of accountability
  - May feel like it provides an element of control
  - Discharges discomfort and pain
    - Expends energy on rage, frustration, and self-pity – leaving us with no fuel left to meaningfully engage the other person on how to move forward
  - Creating a space that promotes emotional safety is a key tenet of trauma informed care
• If the person becomes defensive or seems to shut down, do not follow suit
• Practice patience
• Reiterate that this is not about blame and that your goal is to work together to identify a solution
• Remind yourself that many people have had significant histories of being shamed, blamed, and called out
• There are power dynamics and various systems of oppression to consider: fear about an accountability conversation probably is not about you as an individual
Moving forward from the conversation

Sometimes with attention and empathy, the staff member or volunteer will be prepared to move forward on their own.

If this isn’t the case, consider the following questions:

• Is this a stand-alone issue or part of a larger pattern of concerning behavior?

• What is the priority level of this task? *Is my understanding of that priority level grounded in our current circumstances?*

• What are my next steps if this behavior continues? Have these next steps been made clear to the individual? *Am I prepared to implement these steps?*

• If the issue is rooted in a mental health challenge, are there available resources? Does the individual know about them?
Facilitating social support

- Relationships are a key part of maintaining both mental and physical health.

- Social support gives us the feeling of being loved, cared for, respected, and belonging to a group.

- A strong social support system can improve or protect mental health and decrease symptoms of depression and anxiety.
How does social support strengthen your programming?

Social connections between colleagues can:

• Create a sense of purpose and well-being
• Reduce symptoms of burnout
• Increase collaboration and innovation
Three commonly used social support programs:

- **Employee/volunteer champions**
- **Employee/volunteer resource groups**
- **Peer navigators**
Employee/volunteer champions promote mental health at work by:
• Modeling positive behaviors
• Addressing stigma against mental illness
• Promoting workplace wellness events

In selecting employee/volunteer champions, a good candidate is:
• Respected by both direct reports and management
• Has a passion for mental health
• Willing to be the 'face' of the system
Employee resource groups (ERGs)

ERGs often serve as a source of internal support for employees and symbolize a commitment to certain values. ERGs:

• Represent groups of employees who share concerns about a common topic, such as mental health, gender identity and others
• Support the recruitment and retention of diverse employees
• Facilitate culturally sensitive product development and processes
• Build an inclusive and engaged workforce
Peer navigators

• Peer navigator programs employ people with lived experience of mental illness or substance misuse to model recovery in the workplace. They differ from employee champions in that their *lived experience* is a crucial part of the role.

• Peer navigators are typically used in healthcare or social services.

• Many other types of organizations are starting to explore the role of peers in the workplace.
Moving forward

As we enter the next phase of the pandemic response, organizations must identify creative ways to engage staff and volunteers to help them feel safe and supported:

• Naming the impact of collective trauma can help employees, volunteers, and organizations identify what they are feeling and seeing in the workplace

• Regularly talking about mental health and getting early support in place can help us face the challenges in the months ahead

• Ensuring the physical and emotional safety of our workforce can provide the tools we need to build back better
Q&A

- Please share your questions in the chat
- A copy of the training slides and recording will be shared after the session
Additional workplace mental health resources from Thrive in Your Workplace

Visit [https://thrivenyc.cityofnewyork.us/workplace](https://thrivenyc.cityofnewyork.us/workplace) to learn more about workplace mental health or contact [twp@thrive.nyc.gov](mailto:twp@thrive.nyc.gov) to schedule a free consultation.
Mental health support is available

New Yorkers can visit the ThriveNYC Resource Guide to Mental Health Services to Access While at Home for regularly updated resources, including services tailored to the needs of aging New Yorkers, veterans, students and young people harmed by violence, crime, or abuse.

Follow @MentalHealthNYC on Twitter for the latest updates
References


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Emotional Experience – Phases of Disaster and Collective Trauma: A Graph. Adapted by Lindsay Brahman from Zunin and Meyers/ SAMHSA.gov pub. no. 90-538.
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