



Acknowledging Psychological Trauma and Promoting Resilience During COVID-19

Psychological trauma can be felt in many ways and is an ongoing public health crisis across our city and nation. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought an unprecedented loss of life, financial distress and social isolation, which worsen the feelings of trauma that many experience. Many New York City (NYC) residents are also reeling from incidents of police brutality, racial injustice and inequity, and working to confront centuries of historical trauma experienced by Black and Brown communities, and other communities of color. These concurrent public health crises are significant stressors that can contribute to the trauma and sense of loss many are experiencing.

Defining Trauma and Understanding Its Impact

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) defines trauma as resulting from an event, series of events or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful.¹ Potentially traumatic events like the COVID-19 pandemic can make it difficult to cope and heal. Trauma responses are individualized. We can experience the same event differently and have different reactions to it depending on our coping resources (such as supportive relationships, financial safety net and stress management skills). Those resources can change over time, affecting how we experience and cope with trauma throughout our life.

Traumatic events (including the loss of loved ones or loss of employment) are not experienced equally across all communities. Black and Brown New Yorkers have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 infection and death, and job and wage loss. Black and Latino/a workers who have lost their job are also less likely than White workers to receive governmental assistance.² This can contribute to the difference in trauma experienced by Black and Latino/a people as compared to White people, who may experience the same event but with access to more coping resources.

Secondary traumatic stress occurs when an individual is exposed to the first-hand traumatic experience of someone else. Secondary traumatic stress is typically experienced by those who are regularly exposed to the trauma of others, such as counselors, therapists, first responders, health care workers and individuals not professionally involved (such as friends and family members witnessing trauma affecting their loved ones or communities). Secondary

¹ SAMSHA'S Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration website. https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf. Published July 2014. Accessed July 27, 2020.

² Coleman P, Casselman B. Minority Workers Who Lagged in a Boom Are Hit Hard in a Bust. *The New York Times* website. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/06/business/economy/jobs-report-minorities.html>. Published June 6, 2020. Accessed July 18, 2020.

traumatic stress can contribute to feelings of physical and emotional exhaustion, anger and hopelessness. Acknowledging these feelings in yourself or someone close to you is the first step in addressing them.

Healing From Trauma Is Possible

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from a difficult situation. Promoting safety, transparency and collaboration within relationships, communities and organizations can ease stress and promote resilience.

While building resilience is a useful coping strategy, it is in no way a solution for systemic issues such as racism, which continue to disadvantage and traumatize communities of color. These systemic issues require systemic solutions. Communities are coming together in tremendous numbers to stand against systemic racism and racial inequities. Acknowledging and supporting each other in these moments can allow us to emerge stronger and in greater solidarity.

As New Yorkers recover and respond to the ongoing pandemic, there are opportunities to build resilience and support one another.

Tips for Building Resilience

Acknowledging that feelings of grief, loss and sadness are natural can promote resilience: Accept your feelings. Heal at your own pace and in your own way. Be patient with yourself.

Build supportive connections: Humans are social beings who look to others for validation, belonging and security. Building connections through supportive relationships fosters a sense of safety and community that can support healing. Reconnecting with friends and family members can also be a powerful source of support.

Identify and use your strengths: Community crises can create opportunities to identify personal strengths and qualities (such as bravery, humor and compassion) that can be used to manage the stress resulting from adversity. Use your skills to help others through activities such as volunteering to help you cope. To find volunteer opportunities, visit [Help Now NYC](#) or [NYC Service](#).

Focus on things you can change: Identify challenges and focus on what is within your control. Practice mindfulness and engage in healthy activities. Respond to others with compassion and care, and recognize that people are impacted by COVID-19 differently. Be respectful; check in with people and let them know you are ready to listen to experiences that may be different to yours.

Humor and distraction: Humor can be a powerful coping strategy, and finding opportunities to participate in fun activities can counter some of the negative and painful messages you are experiencing and hearing through the media. Recognize that both of these can also be

avoidance strategies in response to trauma. Using them as a dominant or long-term strategy can enable ongoing avoidance or suppression of painful feelings which may reemerge in potentially harmful and more traumatic ways.

Acknowledge the pain of racial trauma³: Experiences of racial trauma are often ignored or minimized. Create opportunities to discuss your experiences of racism and seek support from people you trust. This can be empowering and healing. You can also find your voice through activism to help manage your pain.

Generate hope: Think, plan and look forward to positive outcomes. Look to people in your community and social network that are helping, and know that there is a community behind you, even if you don't see them. Communities have come together in tremendous numbers, including to stand against racism and racial inequities. Acknowledging and supporting each other in these moments can allow us to emerge stronger and in greater solidarity.

Resources

- NYC WELL staff are available 24/7 and can provide free brief counseling and referrals to care in over 200 languages. For support, call 888-NYC-WELL (888-692- 9355), text "WELL" to 65173 or chat online by visiting nyc.gov/nycwell.
- Visit the [NYC Health Department COVID-19 Coping & Emotional Well-being web page](#) to access various resources.
- For additional resources that address issues, such as financial help, food, health care, insurance coverage and more, see the [Comprehensive Resource Guide](#).
- For general information on COVID-19, including how to guard against stigma, visit nyc.gov/health/coronavirus or cdc.gov/covid19. For real-time updates, text "COVID" to 692-692. Message and data rates may apply.
- To learn more about trauma-informed service providers and organizations visit the [New York State Trauma-Informed Network](#).

The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves.

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³ Jernigan MM, Green CE, Perez-Gualdrón L, et al. Racial Trauma Toolkit. Boston College – Institute for the Study and Promotion of Race and Culture. <https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/lynch-school/sites/isprc/isprc-advisory-board.html>. Published 2015. Accessed July 27, 2020.