

In This Together: Understanding the Effects of Collective Trauma

Events like mass shootings, natural disasters, pandemics, wars, and widespread community violence create shared experiences. They disrupt our sense of safety and security. They cause confusion and uncertainty. This stress is known as collective trauma.

Collective trauma takes many forms. It is stress you can't escape or make sense of why it is happening. It can affect groups of people, of any size, whether they experienced the event firsthand or through the media. It may hit you suddenly or build over time.

People who help other people, including behavioral health providers, first responders, health care workers, and teachers, are at an increased risk of experiencing collective trauma. Balancing personal challenges while helping others in their time of need can be exhausting, and at times, overwhelming.

Why collective trauma is harmful

When people hurt from collective trauma, our communities suffer. Below are some potential outcomes:

- **Mental distress** - This can include posttraumatic stress reactions such as panic attacks, nightmares, and flashbacks.
- **Transgenerational effects** - A cycle of trauma that is passed from one generation to the next generation which may negatively impact numerous generations of people. Intergenerational trauma may result in survivor guilt, depression, increased anxiety, low self-esteem, and numbing out.
- **Changed attitudes and beliefs** - Those who have lived through a traumatic experience may form specific views as a result of the event, such as an increased fear of outside threats or a hopelessness about the future.
- **Disproportionate impact on specific populations** - The people most impacted are those who have experienced other traumatic events, who have preexisting behavioral health issues, or who have been affected by long-standing systemic health and social inequities.



What can you do?

There are ways to reduce the effects of collective trauma. Here are some suggestions:

- Limit your time being exposed to media reports
- Create and form social connections with others (connect with friends and family, join an online group, volunteer, etc.)
- Utilize behavioral health resources
- Enjoy the outdoors and all that nature has to offer
- Exercise
- Practice meditation and mindfulness exercises
- Keep a journal of your thoughts and feelings
- Take care of your physical health (eat healthy foods, reduce or eliminate alcohol consumption, and get plenty of sleep)

Your collective trauma experience is shared by others. This means you are not alone. While other people might not experience it in the exact same way, they are still weathering it alongside you. Remember, it is okay to ask for help. Visit resilient.wisconsin.gov for information and resources on healthy ways to cope with collective trauma.