



# Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress

The Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress (CSTS) is part of the Department of Psychiatry, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences

## LEADERSHIP IN THE WAKE OF TRAGEDY

In a world where we learn about traumatic events, like mass shootings, quickly and suddenly through television, social media, or newspaper coverage, many people can be suddenly and deeply affected by grief over the loss of loved ones, friends or relatives. Leaders play critical roles in the recovery of communities and individuals after disasters. Leaders identify the way forward, and hear and understand the present emotions and needs of their community. They communicate and reflect the community's feelings and shared experience in order to lead the community in recovery.

Understanding how people react to tragic events and the roles leaders play in recovery is critical to effective leadership. In the aftermath of traumatic events, many children and their parents, even those not living in close proximity to the event, want to hear guidance from their community's leaders. In this acute phase, leaders must attend to many responsibilities, including effective communication to people who have questions, seek reassurance, and want to take action.

As shock and horror turn to sorrow and mourning, leaders are responsible for identifying the timing of when a community is ready for the next step forward and how best to speak the language of each community to help individuals, families and care providers.

### Understanding Traumatic Grief

People vary in their reactions to experiencing or learning about traumatic losses. Most will do fine over time, while for some the immediate reactions can last longer than normal and interfere with their return to their work and families. In the short term, many people experience transient, but powerful, grief symptoms. Early grief can include:

- Waves of sadness
  - Intrusive images of the traumatic event and lost loved ones
  - Withdrawal from close relationships with family and friends
  - Avoidance of activities that are reminders of the event
- For some people, grief can be delayed. For others grief may not ever be evident.

**Leaders play critical roles in the recovery of communities and individuals after disasters.**

### Communicate Effectively with Your Community

Worry and distress can spread within and among communities, resulting in rumors and distortion of the facts of the event. Therefore, special attention should be given to optimizing

communication with members of your community and with those outside of your community. Formal and informal leaders can be role models for the importance of sharing grief, communicating hope, identifying facts, managing rumors and providing support to others as needs change over time.

### Immediate Responses

#### ■ Be visible — Make public announcements and appearances

By providing useful and accurate information, leaders can re-establish a sense of safety and enhance the community's trust in leadership.

#### ■ Provide Accurate, timely information on what is known, what is not known, and when more information will be communicated

Press briefings, use of social media and community meetings can reassure families and dispel rumors. Always say when more information will be available.

#### ■ Understand that people process information differently in high stress situations

Keep messages as simple as possible, repeat frequently, and emphasize positive messages (people tend to focus on negative information when stressed).

#### ■ Use multiple channels of communication

People seek information from multiple sources depending on culture, ethnicity, geography, community composition and history. TV, newspapers, radio, ministers, teachers, firefighters and local places of gathering (e.g. post office, grocery, PTA) provide channels for communication.

#### ■ Speak calmly and encourage working together

Leaders promote calmness, empathy, optimism, a can-do attitude and collective healing and recovery. Direct communication between parents and children is important. Return to school nearly always calms children but can be stressful for parents.

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### ■ Know the status of existing and available resources

Monitor emerging needs, support fellow community leaders and structures (such as schools, health, public safety).

### ■ Provide policy and guidance without micromanagement

Provide support to workers and volunteers with a framework for organizing and communicating policy. Recognize you cannot be “at the front” everywhere and others must make the tactical decisions. Foster initiative and cooperation.

### ■ Organize memorial services and sites recognizing the diversity within the community

Respect the desires and needs for families who have sustained losses. The timing of services is important.

### ■ Attending funerals is important

Tears and grieving in public by leaders gives permission to others to express grief and humanizes unthinkable tragedies.

## Recovery

### ■ Focus on future goals

Reorient the community to future objectives, enhanced preparedness, and “we can do it.”

### ■ Acknowledge those from within and outside the community who want to and do help

Establish a climate of healing and community support.

### ■ Provide common goals for future direction

Redirect energy into needed recovery projects and respectful remembering and rebuilding efforts.

### ■ Avoid blaming

Blame directed towards groups or individuals leads to stigma, anger, and desire for retribution. Redirect energy to providing support and future needs.

## Growing

■ Work to return community activities to normal, but tolerate if recovery is slow.

■ Recovery takes time, is not linear, and is influenced by future events that are always unknown.

■ Set and celebrate achievable goals.

■ Community rituals provide an opportunity for individuals and families to heal and reflect on their experience in their own style. These can cross racial, cultural and socioeconomic divides.

■ Beware of identifying a “we and they”.

■ Be alert to the fault lines such as racial or socioeconomic differences of the community. These tend to expand and become areas for conflict.

■ Expect community disappointment and anger after the initial sense of togetherness. Help the community understand the changing trajectory of recovery.

■ Take care of yourself. You need supporting staff, friends, family who remind you to rest and can objectively advise you about things you do not see or do. Not recognize the importance of. Keep your advisors informed and listen to their perspectives.

## Resources

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress  
National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Psychiatric Association  
American Psychological Association  
American Red Cross

[www.cstsonline.org](http://www.cstsonline.org)  
[www.ncstn.org](http://www.ncstn.org)  
[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)  
[www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)  
[www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)  
[www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)  
[www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)



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