

Faith Communities & Trauma Resilience

The way you as a religious leader interpret events and frame critical incidents can either help individuals and groups heal, or further inflame situations by keeping individuals and groups stuck in unending cycles of victimhood and/or violence. You can help reduce actions and attitudes of backlash, revenge, victimhood, and other personal, social, and spiritual maladies before, during, and after disaster.

TIP SHEET

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*The following concepts, terms, and tips come out of a training program called **Strategies for Trauma Awareness & Resilience (STAR)** developed by Eastern Mennonite University in collaboration with Church World Service. The STAR training program is available in partnership with NDIN through the STAR New York Office. Please visit www.emu.edu/star or www.n-din.org to learn more, or contact STAR NYC at info@n-din.org.*

TERMS

Conflict Transformation seeks to prevent, reduce, transform, and support recovery from violence in all forms, recognizing that issues of justice, human security, and spirituality will impact and be impacted by strategic processes for trauma healing in individuals and communities.

Resilience is the ability to recover readily from change or adversity.

Resilient Communities work together to meet human needs and human rights without obstructing the needs and rights of others. Before, during, and after disasters, you can help your community focus on meeting needs and protecting human rights in a way that recognizes interdependence, fosters relationships of partnership rather than domination, and limits all forms of violence. Both structural and direct forms of violence disrupt or deny people's efforts to meet their human needs, and inevitably increase the burden of trauma on individuals and communities.

Trauma is an experience that produces psychological injury or pain. Traumatic events and experiences impact individuals, groups, and communities. Responses to trauma may include psychological, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, spiritual, and societal effects. Most traumas are resolved through natural healing processes, but trauma which does not heal can lead to outcomes which cause further harm, either to the self or others.

CHOICES FOR LEADERS IN FRAMING CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Two types of leaders that can emerge during times of crisis in large groups:

“Positive” leaders (What to do):

- Evaluate realistic dangers, separating fantasy from reality
- Value freedom of speech and the ability to question what is moral
- Raise questions that explore the humanity of “enemy” groups
- Provide a spiritual and moral compass leading the search for a “third way” through trauma (neither passivity nor violence)
- Help individuals and groups to live by their highest values
- Seek to restore ties to families, clans and other groups that support reconnecting with reality
- Help individuals and groups to view trauma as an invitation to spiritual, emotional, and societal transformation rather than identifying themselves as victims or acting out against others

“Malignant” leaders (What not to do):

- Escalate anxiety by magnifying dangers, blurring reality and fantasy, and barraging the public with constant reminders of looming, unspecific potential threats
- Manipulate by withholding, distorting or misrepresenting facts, goals and situations
- Engage in name-calling; label dissenting views as unpatriotic or traitorous
- Dehumanize by defining “us/them” and “good/evil” identities

SUPPORTING RESILIENCE THROUGH PREPAREDNESS - What Can You Do Before an Incident Occurs?

- **Reach out to** your community and build networks of resources, including support for spiritual/emotional/mental health.
- Participate in STAR training.
- **Provide training in conflict resolution skills**, including self-reflection, active listening, assertive and diplomatic speaking, creative problem-solving, dialogue, negotiation, and mediation, in addition to an array of trauma interventions.
- **Use your voice** to promote tolerance, peace, and justice in your community.
- **Listen** to victimized, marginalized communities; promote dialogue on problems and solutions within interfaith networks.
- **Encourage reporting** of hate crimes and bias incidents.
- **Form local and community-wide interfaith groups** to build understanding and mutual respect.
- **Identify community leaders**; help them join together, coordinate their efforts, and speak with a common public voice.
- **Give help when justice issues come up** – for instance, if legal immigrants have lost proof of their green cards.
- **Urge** local and state government officials to be aware of injustice concerns.
- **Organize creative public responses** to any signs of ethnic/religious/cultural bias.

SUPPORTING RESILIENCE IN RESPONSE - What Can You Do When an Incident Occurs?

- **Promote messages of peace and understanding** as soon as possible after an incident has occurred, and encourage local politicians and law enforcement to take a positive, pro-active approach as well. Anecdotal evidence shows this works in curtailing violence.
- **Stay informed** through interfaith and other networks about what is happening.
- **Reach out** to and support those communities who have been victimized.
- **Encourage the media to be positive and creative** in their approach to continued reporting.
- **Avoid exposing children to graphic images** whether on news cycles or print media.
- **Denounce backlash and scapegoating against perceived perpetrators**; promote ethnic, racial and religious tolerance and relief/recovery partnerships. No individual bears collective guilt for the actions of a few from their community.
- **Collaborate to create a political and religious will to memorialize events** in healthy, creative ways as the community moves forward.
- **Announce** houses of worship which are open for people to go to pray and find help/support.

SUPPORTING RESILIENCE IN RECOVERY - What Can You Do to Rebuild?

- **“Normalize”** responses to trauma, acknowledging pain and the “normal” desire for return to equilibrium/balance/justice, and help your congregation process their own responses.
- **Draw on** individuals’ assets, strengths, and deeper purpose: “We have been through tough times together before. Let’s take stock of the resources we have that will help us meet this challenge.”
- **Encourage** a desire for fairness, discouraging revenge: “What they did was harmful, unjust, and immoral. How can we take care of our feelings without harming others in return?”
- **Present the gray areas** of the situation and humanize the enemy: “What’s going on here that we need to ask about?”
- **Denounce “justified” violence**: “Violence of any kind always carries a cost. We can choose positive ways to respond.”
- **Create rituals** and safe places to grieve and memorialize over time.
- **Help** the group get clearer about their losses as well as their remaining resources.
- **Help identify** risks that could be taken in encountering “the other,” and create a structure of accountability for offenders.
- **Teach** the importance of interconnectedness and tolerance.
- **Create opportunities** to face offenders in a safe place, if appropriate. This needs to be handled very carefully, but can be highly effective in healing: for example, Truth and Reconciliation-style processes.
- **Educate about forgiveness** — healthy forgiveness that does not traumatize.
- **Support** ways to make the situation “right,” addressing harm done to victims and requiring accountability for “wrong” done within the community.
- **Facilitate** initiatives where involved individuals can create a new, collective narrative about the event/s.
- **Be available** to assist in reconciliation.
- **Encourage** individuals to share their stories of healing, transformation, and hope.

OTHER RESOURCES

- Boston University School of Theology, Religion and Conflict Transformation Program: www.bu.edu/rct/home/
- Centers for Disease Control (CDC) — Coping with Disasters and Trauma: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/>
- Church World Service — Community Arise/Spiritual Care: <http://communityarise.com/CMemoandSpirit.htm>
- Eastern Mennonite University, Strategies for Trauma Awareness & Resilience Program — www.emu.edu/star
- National Disaster Interfaiths Network — Disaster Chaplain Training: www.n-din.org
- NYDIS (New York Disaster Interfaith Services) — “The NYDIS Manual for Religious Leaders: Spiritual Care and Mental Health for Disaster Response in New York City”: www.nydis.org