

# Collective Trauma

Collective trauma are traumatic events that affect a whole group of people - this could be a family unit, a school community, a gender group, or an entire society. Collective trauma can take many forms, it could be a war, genocide, natural disaster, or the removal of large numbers of children from their families, as experienced by Aboriginal people through the Stolen Generations.

Collective trauma goes beyond the psychological impact to individuals because there is also a collective processing, grieving and recovery processes, which can alter the collective 'sense of self' or cultural fabric of the collective.

## Unique Impacts of Collective Trauma

Collective traumas are significant because they may become transformative for an entire community. Some cultures define themselves heavily by a collective trauma and how they healed. Additionally, people may change the way they live or create systems as a result of these events.

## Coronavirus and Collective Trauma

Although collective trauma can affect large communities of people, the extent and circumstances may vary. The current pandemic has made this very clear by highlighting the many inequities around the world. While a whole group may be exposed to a collective trauma, not everyone is impacted the same. For example, with the COVID-19 pandemic, those that are on the frontlines may be more likely to directly experience loss or those with families in countries where death tolls are high. Those whose employment was/is impacted may have had a significant financial impact, which could be made worse if they've already a history of trauma or come from backgrounds with significant stress and hardship (i.e., families from marginalized or financially disadvantaged backgrounds) are more likely to be impacted by the collective trauma.

There are many direct and indirect impacts of collective trauma that could cause a traumatic reaction in children and young people. These include:

- being exposed to the 24-hour news cycle reporting crisis and death tolls. This saturation exposure can increase anxiety and trigger previous trauma
- experiencing the loss related to the trauma of others, like the death of loved ones, friends, pets, destruction of meaningful places, and disruption of routine

- having reduced individual support because people in support networks are also impacted.

Children will recover from their experiences if they receive the necessary support. Some will recover from the support of their family or caregivers and friends, while others will need clinical intervention. The same may apply for their parents and caregivers.

For more information see: [Supporting children after natural and human-induced disasters](#). This webinar discussed how you can help children and families navigate the different stages of collective (community) trauma.

## Collective Response to Trauma for Refugees

For refugee communities, the chronic terror they have experienced can mean their relationships with family and friends and connection to religion and culture is harmed. Many refugee families who arrive in Australia are isolated from their support networks. Refugee communities may have problems such as internal conflict, fragmentation and distrust of each other and authority. However, refugee communities can also be a strong source of support for one another (STARTTS, 2020).

For further information see: [Trauma and Refugees](#) factsheet.

## Collective Trauma and Aboriginal Communities

Stolen generations + colonisation + sorry business = continuous grief and loss.

Aboriginal communities across Australia experience collective trauma due to past and current practices, which can become intergenerational trauma (factsheet coming). Please see factsheet: [Trauma in Aboriginal Communities](#) for more information.

Aboriginal families are collective and therefore through kinships systems and connections the trauma experienced by individuals impacts whole communities. When whole communities experience trauma, whole communities need to heal. Walking alongside Aboriginal communities to heal is required and people and communities heal in their own way and own time.

## Collective Trauma and the Permanency Support Program

Children supported through the Permanency Support Program (PSP) have experienced trauma prior to removal, possibly in the form of abuse, neglect, or trauma in utero. The process of removal from parents, kin and community compounds this trauma. Subsequent collective trauma is likely to trigger a child and re-enforce that the world around them is unsafe.

Collective traumas can also adversely affect a child's support network, including their parents and carers and casework staff, potentially reducing their capacity to provide trauma-informed care at a time that a child needs it most.

Communities are also a source of strength. By exploring connection to community and culture, you may help children and families regain a positive sense of collective identity and pride in the culture. Use cultural consultations and connect with local Aboriginal or culturally based organisations to help you find sources of support.

### How Can You Help the Child?

- It's important to talk to the child, listen to their concerns, answer their questions, and give them an opportunity to express their feelings.
- Remain calm, be honest, and reassuring with the child. Let them know it's okay if they feel upset. Share with them how you deal with your own stress so that they can learn from how you cope.
- Explore the child's culture and connections to community. Who are the important people in their community and what role do they play in their lives and the lives of their family? How could they help them?
- Talk to the child about their skills and abilities and together list positive actions they can take. Emphasise their strengths and the importance of what they can do to help in the event. For example, they could make cards for people who have suffered. Encourage them use their imagination and make it fun. This is important in building a child's empowerment.
- Limit their exposure to news coverages of the event, including social media. However, don't lie to them or promise anything that can't be delivered and don't close them off completely to the event particularly if they're going to learn about it elsewhere such as school. If they are intent on watching and its age appropriate ensure you watch it with them and talk with about the emotions and thoughts as they watch. You could also try

distracting them with activities to do to help them calm or distract them from watching the coverage.

- Help the child to stay socially connected.
- Look for the positives for example with the NSW bushfires (2019-2020) you could discuss the bravery of the firefighters and community members, the generosity of the volunteers who came to help provide food and shelter.
- Help the child's carers to understand the impact on them and how to provide a supportive home

For a deeper analysis of the impact of collective trauma, watch "[Working with Collective Trauma: Gabor Maté & Thomas Hübl](#)"

## References

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