



Addressing Community Grief and Trauma in the Wake of the Buffalo Tragedy

May 18, 2022

The New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH) joins all New Yorkers in expressing grief and sadness over the traumatic events that took place in Buffalo over the weekend.

OMH is extremely focused on ensuring we are providing both short-term and long-term supports to those in communities of need in Buffalo and across New York State.

We also recognize that trauma is being experienced by people, particularly people of color, across the entire state due to the severity of the event, news being shared on social media, and historical trauma in communities of color.

Today's Mission

Help New Yorkers understand how to assist individuals, families, and youth coping with the grief and trauma caused by this horrific event.

Provide general information about the mental health effects of racism and violence, crisis response, and helping others cope with grief and trauma. Specific information focused on children and youth will also be provided.

Providing Support in Communities of Color

- Social determinants of health have historically prevented communities of color from having equal opportunities for economic, physical, and emotional health.
- Historical and current experiences of racism and discrimination contribute to mistrust of the healthcare system among racial and ethnic minority groups.
- Experiencing racism and discrimination is proven to have a direct impact on an individual's mental and physical health.
- The COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on communities of color is a stark example of enduring health disparities.

Today's Speakers

Matthew Canuteson, MA - New York State Office of Mental Health, Chief Diversity Officer

Steven Moskowitz, LMSW - New York State Office of Mental Health, Bureau of Emergency Preparedness and Response

Sarah Kuriakose, PhD, BCBA-D - New York State Office of Mental Health, Associate Commissioner, Division of Integrated Community Services for Children and Families

Sidney Hankerson, MD, MBA - Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, Associate Professor & Vice Chair, Department of Psychiatry, Director, Mental Health Equity Research, Department of Population Health

Disaster Response & Recovery

Attention is commonly directed toward the **immediate physical health and community infrastructure** risks in the aftermath of disasters and traumatic events.

Important: Mass Violence is Unlike Other Disasters

- Loss of life is more substantial than loss of property.
- Shattered sense of safety; “safe places” no longer feel safe.
- Innocent victims.
- Children & adolescents may be primary actors.

OMH and Traumatic Events

In the aftermath of this event, OMH's focus is on the **psychological impact** the violence has on those in the community.

OMH's Buffalo Response

Provide mental health support to local, state, and federal partners including:

- County Departments of Mental Health
- NYS Office of Emergency Management
- US Department of Health and Human Services
- American Red Cross

Various Types of Support

- Direct crisis counseling services to impacted communities.
- Development and distribution of information to individuals and organizations.
- Coordination of services to ensure coverage.
- Seeking financial resources to support on-going efforts.

OMH's Disaster Response Activities

- Disaster Mental Health Counseling.
- NY Project Hope Crisis Counseling.
- Public Webinars and Training.
- Addressing both the immediate and longer-term needs of the communities impacted.

NY Project Hope

NY Project Hope Emotional Support Helpline: 1-844-863-9314 or visit [nyprojecthope.org](https://www.nyprojecthope.org)

New York has a free, confidential helpline as part of the FEMA response to COVID-19



NY Project Hope
Coping with COVID

New York's free and confidential COVID-19
Emotional Support Helpline

8am - 10pm / 7 Days

1-844-863-9314

www.NYProjectHope.org

A program of the NYS Office of Mental Health | Funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency



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**Office of
Mental Health**

Impact of Mass Violence

- The impact of violence is widespread and to varying degrees affects victims, responders, and the community-at-large.
- Incidents of violence can result in more serious and long-lasting psychological effects than other disasters.
- Disasters of mass violence are particularly hard to comprehend.
- The impact of multiple disasters can feel overwhelming, leading to hopelessness.

Impact of Hate-Based Violence

- Hate-based violence threatens or harms the victims, and also is intended to send a message to the entire community to which the victims belong.
- The traumatic effect is compounded for the group, in this case Black and African Americans, and related groups, in this case other racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups.
- Many impacted families and community members experience multiple losses at once.

Hate-Based Violence and Racial Trauma

- These effects are on top of racial trauma from individual and societal level bias and discrimination, which have impacts on mental and physical health.
- In the last few years, there have been disproportionate impacts of COVID-19, police-related violence, and economic losses in communities of color, particularly Black communities.
- These communities have higher barriers to accessing mental health treatment.

Understanding the Impact

- Everyone touched by the disaster is affected in some way.
- Stress, anxiety, and grief, are common reactions to uncommon situations.
- Responses are varied and individual; you may be surprised at your own reaction.
- Reactions change over time.

**Traumatic
Stress
has the power
to overwhelm
coping
abilities**



- If you feel intense or overwhelming emotions, that is normal and does not mean you will feel this way forever.
- Most people feel better and safer over time with support and coping skills.
- It is important to watch out for yourself and for others so that you can get additional help if needed.

Collective Grief and Trauma in the Black Community

- Individual loss and grief is in the context of collective, unceasing grief
- Collective grief is in the historical context of enslavement, structural inequality, historical and ongoing racial violence, and staggering loss
- Multiple losses have psychological and physical health effects

Reactions to Trauma

Emotional, such as crying or despair.

Behavioral, such as withdrawing, engaging in conflict, using more substances.

Physical, such as fatigue or pain.

Cognitive, such as forgetfulness or perseveration.

Spiritual, such as hopelessness.

Feeling Afraid or Unsafe

- Mass violence is shocking and can make you fear for your safety.
- Fear and not feeling safe are common reactions after mass violence. If people were killed at places you go, doing things you do, it is normal to feel scared and unsafe.
- Fears for yourself and your loved ones who are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and religious minorities are heightened.

Typical Reactions

- Not being able to fall or stay asleep, not getting restful sleep, having nightmares.
- Having trouble concentrating, feeling in a fog or dazed.
- Feeling sad, angry, or afraid that the mass violence will happen again.
- Feeling isolated, or numb, like friends and family don't understand, or feeling distant from them.
- Feeling angry at society, authorities, self, God.

Typical Reactions

- Being unable to get rid of thoughts, images, or visions of the mass violence event.
- Experiencing headaches, stomachaches, a racing heart, or a change in appetite.
- Having sights, sounds, people, places, or other things remind you of the violence.
- Feeling jumpy, irritable, or on guard for danger all or nearly all of the time.
- Feeling a loss of trust in institutions and searching for meaning.

Typical Reactions of Children

- Behavioral challenges, like tantrums, fighting, or arguing.
- Regressions, such as setbacks in sleeping and toileting.
- Reacting physically such as stomachaches and headaches.
- Anxiety, difficulty separating, avoiding situation or fearful to go outside.
- Violence in play or story.
- Fears about sounds or sights.

Typical Reactions of Adolescents

- Feeling sad, scared, confused, numb, hopeless, guilty, or that life is meaningless.
- Change in sleeping and eating.
- Difficulty concentrating on schoolwork.
- Intense engagement with social media, gaming, even while sometimes engaging less outside technology.
- Serious unsafe behaviors like self-harm and using substances.

Coping Tools: Don't Underestimate the Basics

- Eat well and stay hydrated
- Physical activity
- Bathe, dress, comb hair
- Sleep well and in a routine
- Purposeful activity
- Time outside
- Time to check in with yourself
- Down time

Take One Thing at a Time

- For people under stress, an ordinary workload can sometimes seem unbearable.
- Pick one urgent task and work on it. Once you accomplish that task, choose the next one.
- “Checking off” tasks will give you a sense of accomplishment and make things feel less overwhelming.

Do Something Positive

- Give blood, prepare “care packages”, donate, write letters, participate in advocacy, volunteer.
- Helping other people can give you a sense of purpose in a situation that feels ‘out of your control.’”

Limit Media and Social Media Exposure

- After mass violence, media and social media coverage is constant. You may be tempted to stay glued to your phone, but this can cause even more distress.
- Try to disconnect from the news and social media at least for several hours every day. If watching TV or being on your phone helps you to cope, turn on a movie, watch a channel that doesn't have news alerts, or play a game.

Find Things to Enjoy

- It's okay to disengage from tragedy. Give yourself permission to have fun and to laugh.
- Consider doing something you really enjoy every day such as going for a walk, writing/journaling, creating art, listening to music, being with family or friends, spending time with your pets, or engaging in other relaxing activities.

Coping with Racism and Racial Trauma

If you're experiencing racism, it is not your responsibility to fight against it or battle the systems that support its structure. But it is important to learn how to cope with its effects. Self-care and self-love can be healing and anti-racist acts.



Find a role model or mentor.
This connection can be a powerful part of coping.



Talk about your experiences.
People who don't acknowledge the racial discrimination they've experienced are often at higher risk for mental health struggles.



Name what you are feeling as you feel it. When your emotions are a reaction to racism, label the connection. It can be empowering and validating.



Remind yourself that taking time to pause can improve your health. Rest is an act of self-care and healing.



Connect with others who understand what you experience and can provide social support. Peer interaction is one of the most effective ways to cope. This connection could be with a friend, family member, or a mental health professional.



Identify your specific triggers (places, people, or situations) and think about how to cope with them. Role-playing how to react may help with anxiety and help you process the trauma.



Consider getting involved in activism and problem-solving. It can help boost your sense of control, confidence and contribution. It can also help connect you to others who can validate and support you.

Coping by Connecting

- Find ways to connect with your family, friends, and other people who make you feel more relaxed. By talking with others about the event, you can relieve stress and realize that others share your feelings.
- Don't cut yourself off from loved ones. Find a way to help others through volunteering, or other community activities. Finding ways to connect with others often leads to feeling better.
- Be compassionate with yourself and be gentle with your expectations for yourself.
- Ask for support if you need a break. If you are worried about how someone is coping, check in with them, and let them know you care. Check in with people who may be affected, including BIPOC friends and loved ones.

Helping Children and Youth Cope

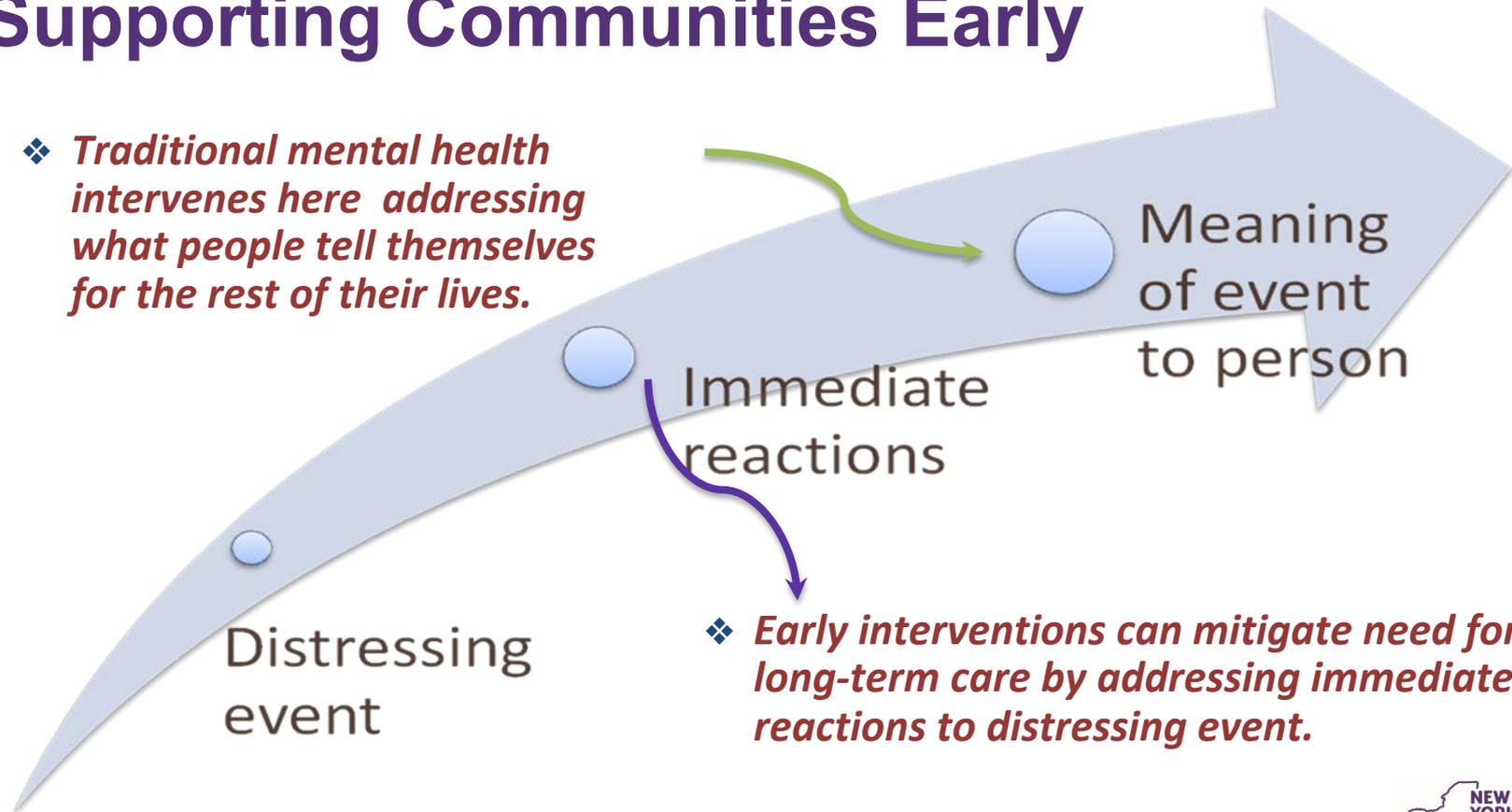
- Talk to your children. Ask them what they know. Avoid pushing if they are not ready and keep offering.
- Normalize feelings of anxiety, stress, guilt, sadness, fear, etc.
- Understand that BIPOC children may have different and more intense reactions.
- Promote your children's coping skills.
- Keep routines and expectations going. Provide some extra check-ins.

Helping Children and Youth Cope

- Bring in your network to support you and your children.
- Address dangerous behaviors. Help adolescents understand that dangerous behaviors can sometimes be a way to express difficult feelings and help identify alternatives.
- Limit media and social media use as possible.
- Seek support for yourself and your child as needed.

Supporting Communities Early

- ❖ *Traditional mental health intervenes here addressing what people tell themselves for the rest of their lives.*



- ❖ *Early interventions can mitigate need for long-term care by addressing immediate reactions to distressing event.*

Psychological First Aid Principles

- **A sense of safety** - physical safety, protection from continued stress.
- **Calming** - calming the body.
- **A sense of self and community efficacy** - reminding people of their strengths and resources and their knowledge about what they need.
- **Connectedness** - helping people tap into their social support.
- **Hope** - normalizing reactions, reminding people of how they have coped in the past, and changes occurring.

Post-Traumatic Stress Reactions

- Being unable to manage your responses to the disaster and resume your regular activities may be symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a real and treatable illness.
 - **Intrusive Reactions**, meaning ways the traumatic experience comes back to mind.
 - **Avoidance and Withdrawal Reactions**, including avoiding people, places and things that are reminders of the attacks, withdrawal reactions, including feeling emotionally numb, detached or estranged from others, and losing interest in usual pleasurable activities.
 - **Physical Arousal Reactions**, including sleep difficulties, poor concentration, irritability, jumpiness, nervousness, and being “on the lookout for danger.”

Seeking Help

- These reactions are common and understandable, and they are serious.
- Help is available in many forms.
- Asking for help is a sign of strength, not a sign of weakness.



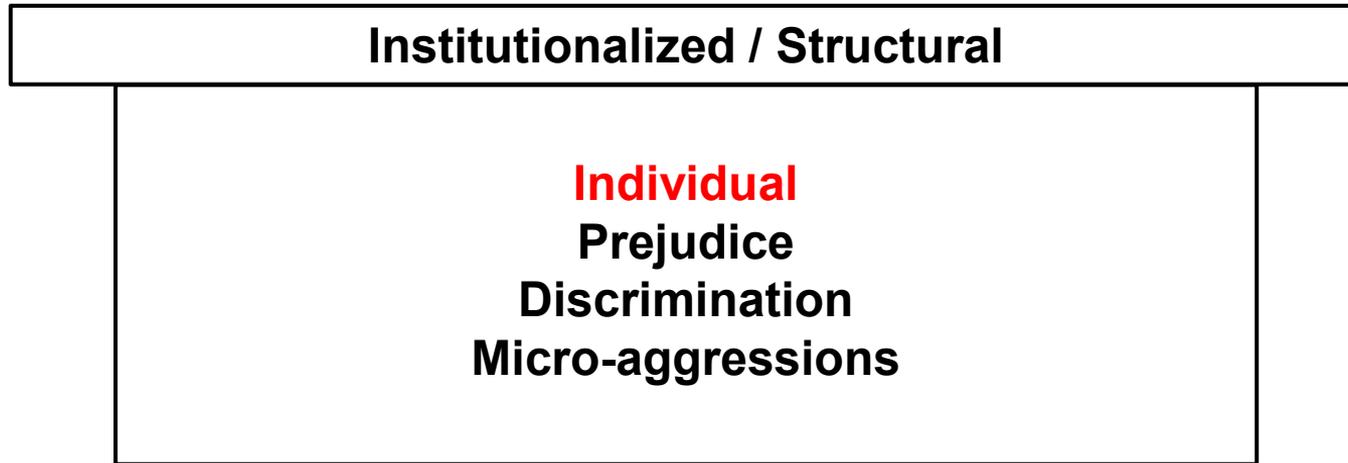
“It takes a village to raise a child.” (African proverb)



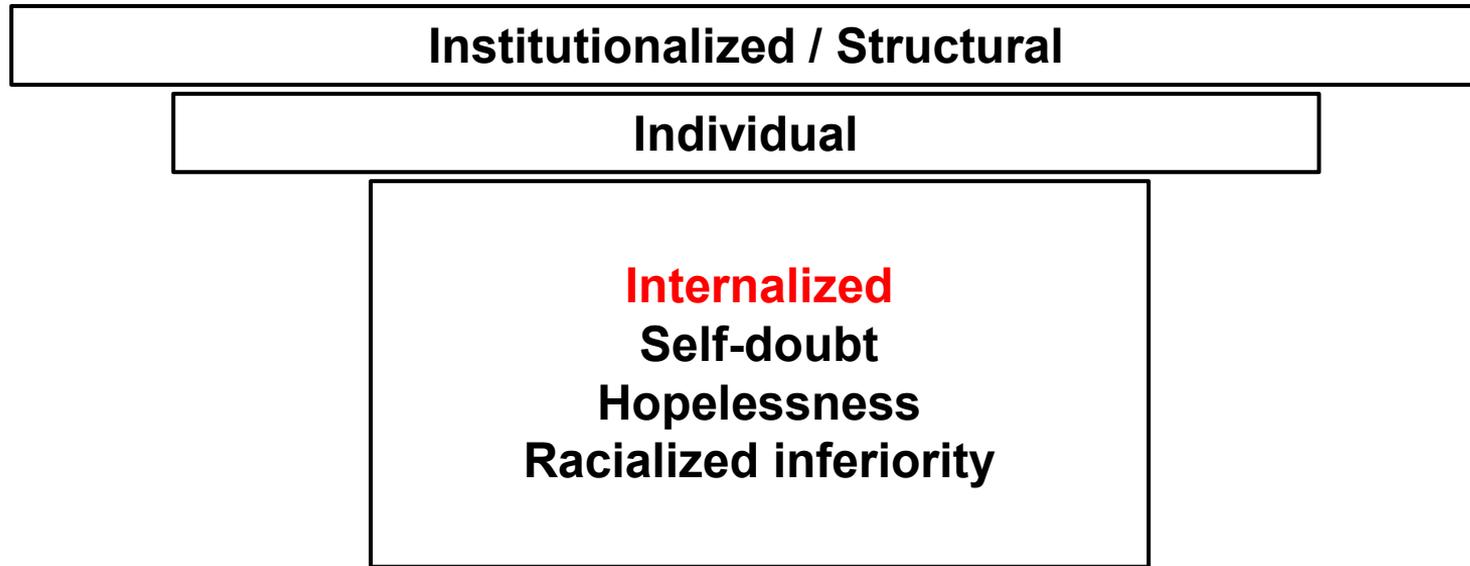
Calling out Racism as a Driver of Mental Health Inequities

Institutionalized / Structural
Education
Housing
Healthcare Access
Criminal Justice System

Calling out Racism as a Driver of Mental Health Inequities



Calling out Racism as a Driver of Mental Health Inequities



Calling in Community to Promote Collective Recovery

- African Americans are more likely to get support from “informal networks” like clergy, family members, and community leaders than mental health professionals
- Community engaged, multi-level interventions reduce mental health inequities
- Collective recovery helped New York State heal after 9/11

Continuing Community Healing after the News Cycle Ends

- OMH is committed to community engagement
 - The HOPE Center Harlem
 - Strategic Plan for Statewide Stigma Reduction
 - Mental Health Equity and Cultural Competence
 - Suicide Prevention among Black Youth
 - Building on community strengths
- Addressing social determinants of health
- Breaking generational cycles of trauma

Resources

Disaster Distress Helpline: 1-800-985-5990 (English/Spanish); TTY: 1-800-846-8517.

24-hour Crisis Text Line: Text GOT5 to 741741 to Connect with a Crisis Counselor, Free 24/7 support.

24-Hour Support for Deaf or hard of hearing American Sign Language users: The national Disaster Distress Helpline (DDH) is now offering direct crisis counseling and support for Deaf or hard of hearing American Sign Language users via a dedicated videophone option.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: The SAMHSA-funded National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a source of support available 24/7 to people in crisis, including challenging reactions to disasters. Call 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255), or, for support in Spanish, call 1-888-628-9454. <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>.

New York Project Hope Emotional Support Helpline: 7 days a week, 8am-10pm
1-844-863-9314 or visit <https://nyprojecthope.org>

Resources

For the most up to date information about what is occurring in Buffalo as well as available resources for those impacted visit the [Governor's Website](#).

[New York State Office of Mental Health](#)

[Coping Tips for Traumatic Events and Disasters](#)

[Tips for Survivors of a Disaster or Other Traumatic Event: Managing Stress](#)

[Psychological First Aid](#)

[Coping with Stress Following a Mass Shooting](#)

[The Mental Health Effects of Racism](#)

[Leadership Communication: Anticipating And Responding To Stressful Events](#)

[Grief Leadership: Leadership In The Wake Of Tragedy](#)

Resources

[National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)

[For Teens: Coping After Mass Violence\(En Español\)](#)

[Helping Youth after Community Trauma: Tips for Educators\(En Español\)](#)

[Talking to Children about Mass Violence](#)

[Teacher Guidelines for Helping Students after Mass Violence](#)

[Psychological Impact of Mass Violence](#)

[Helping School-Age Children with Traumatic Grief: Tips for Caregivers \(En Español\)](#)

Material for this presentation was based on material from several sources including SUNY New Paltz, Institute for Disaster Mental Health, SAMHSA Disaster Technical Assistance Center, and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Further information on disaster related stress can be obtained by contacting...

Steven Moskowitz, MSW

OMH Bureau of Emergency Preparedness and Response

steven.moskowitz@omh.ny.gov