Enterprise

Trauma-Informed Disaster Response

About Centering Well-Being

Disasters are deeply emotional events that can trigger significant mental health challenges for both those directly affected and those responding. Each person's reaction is shaped not only by the disaster itself but also by past experiences with trauma, which can influence how they engage in recovery efforts.

Trauma may occur during the event—such as waking to a house fire, experiencing an earthquake, or watching floodwaters enter a home—or during evacuation, especially when there is uncertainty about safety, destinations, or possessions left behind. For many, the loss and scarcity following a disaster can lead to anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health challenges, making it harder to fully participate in recovery and rebuilding.

Two types of trauma frequently arise during disaster response:

- Individual trauma: results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

- Collective trauma: is felt by a group of people. Collective trauma is often felt and faced by frontline communities, specifically communities of color and low-income communities that have faced disenfranchisement, housing displacement, racial discrimination, and poverty. Natural hazards or disasters aggravate this trauma.

Disasters leave lasting scars, and recovery can reopen those wounds. Navigating FEMA or insurance claims can mean reliving painful memories, while the loss of a home—whether through condemnation or damage—brings uncertainty and stress. Delays in aid or rebuilding can make these challenges even harder, forcing residents to weigh difficult choices about whether to stay or start over elsewhere, often without the safety net of affordable housing options.

Enterprise

Building Trust

During the 2017 and 2019 Sonoma County fires, some Spanish-speaking residents reported discrimination in shelters, where perceived immigration status blocked access to vital resources and information. For communities already wary of police, increased presence during disasters can deepen fear and retraumatization.

These experiences erode trust in institutions, discourage people from seeking help, and limit participation in recovery and planning.

Trauma-Informed Approach

Having a trauma-informed approach in a disaster requires communities and decision-makers to come together to understand the impact of historical trauma, anticipate potential traumas that might arise during a disaster, and invest in programs and processes that minimize and mitigate these traumas.

Doing so will build necessary relationships and trust and break down barriers for impacted communities to engage in the process of recovery.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), being trauma-informed means understanding the widespread effects of trauma, recognizing its signs in others, and responding by embedding this knowledge into policies and practices while working to prevent re-traumatization.

According to SAMHSA, a trauma-informed approach is built on six key principles:

1. **Safety** – Ensure people feel physically and emotionally safe, with secure environments and respectful interactions.

2. **Trustworthiness and Transparency** – Be open and honest in decisions and operations to build trust with clients, families, staff, and partners.

3. **Peer Support** – Use the lived experiences of survivors and their peers to build trust, hope, and healing. For children, peers can include supportive family members or caregivers.

4. **Collaboration and Mutuality** – Value everyone's role—staff, volunteers, and clients alike—in creating a supportive, healing environment.

5. **Empowerment, Voice, and Choice** – Recognize strengths, share decision-making, and support self-advocacy so people can shape their own recovery.

6. **Cultural, Historical, and Gender Sensitivity** – Respect and respond to people's cultural identities, histories, and needs, while challenging stereotypes and addressing past injustices.

ⁿⁱ Enterprise®

Impact on frontline communities

Trauma-informed care strengthens disaster response and recovery by recognizing the lasting impacts of trauma and integrating practices that promote safety, trust, and healing. Everyone has a role to play—from local organizations and housing providers to government agencies and philanthropy—in ensuring that programs, policies, and services reflect this approach.

The following actions outline practical steps each sector can take to embed trauma-informed principles into their work.

For community-based organizations and affordable housing providers

- Seek out experts in trauma-informed care to support your work and community members.
- Incorporate trauma-informed practices into your programs, policies, and processes.
- Advocate for local government and emergency management agencies to use trauma-informed care in emergency operations planning and other planning documents.

For local and state government

- Incorporate trauma-informed care into your plans, programs, policies, and processes.
- Invest in training from and hiring experts to support the development and maintenance of trauma-informed care throughout your agency.
- Ensure that there is trauma-informed care for first responders and other government employees who consistently respond to trauma.

For philanthropy

- Support community-based organizations and local government in accessing training and hiring experts to incorporate trauma-informed care in their work.

More Resources

- SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Resources for State and Local Governments, Coping with a Disaster or Traumatic Event

- Ready.gov's Coping with Disaster

- American Psychiatric Association's Tips and Resources on Coping After Trauma and Disaster

- American Psychological Association's Recovering Emotionally from Disaster

Enterprise