

Ten ways we can better respond to the pandemic in a trauma-informed way

October 8 2021, by Christina Heris Et Al



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Fear is one of the [central emotional responses during the pandemic](#). [Every day brings a new level of stress](#): concerns about getting sick, the stigma of testing positive, financial difficulties due to not being able to

work, separation from loved ones in lockdown (or being locked in an unsafe household). The list goes on.

For many of us, uncomfortable feelings can be "natural" responses to a "threat." Our strong, primitive defense or "[threat response](#)" (sometimes called "[fight, flight or freeze](#)") has enabled human beings to survive. This [stress response](#) is essential for survival against poisonous snakes, crocodiles and other dangerous situations.

Unfortunately, our "threat responses" [are not good](#) at recognizing the difference between the "threat" from a crocodile and a pandemic. These responses happen [much faster than any conscious thought](#).

It can be particularly hard for people already experiencing [complex post-traumatic stress disorder](#) or [trauma](#) associated with [earlier exposure](#) to severe, repeated and inescapable threats or abuse, often from those meant to protect them.

As the pandemic hit last year, we were working on the [Healing the Past by Nurturing the Future](#) project, which aims to improve support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents experiencing complex trauma.

We asked ourselves whether the public health response to the pandemic can take into account people's previous trauma.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the US thought so when it integrated [key principles of trauma-informed care](#) into [training for its Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response](#) in 2018.

Taking core concepts from [our research](#) and [guiding principles](#), we identified 10 principles that may decrease stress or trauma by fostering a sense of security, well-being, confidence, hope and resilience.

1. Safety

The first priority of any emergency or "trauma-informed response" is to ensure physical safety from the [immediate threat](#) (like [first aid principles](#)). This includes the safety of people most at risk during lockdowns (for example, those experiencing [family violence](#)).

2. Connectedness and collaboration

Humans are [social beings](#) and being "connected" is another essential survival strategy that is more helpful to us in the pandemic than "fighting, fleeing, or freezing."

When we have [social support](#), it's easier to [take action in an emergency](#). But it's not easy staying "socially connected" yet "physical distanced" in an infectious disease outbreak.

[Inequitable responses to the pandemic](#) can also lead to divisions in society, such as when one community appears to receive [greater financial support](#) or an [unfair allocation of vaccines](#).

However, looking after each other is our ticket out of here. We have seen this with the global [scientific collaborations](#) in the quest to create COVID-19 vaccines.

3. Compassion and caring

Acts of kindness, compassion and caring are needed more now than ever. Compassion and empathy promote well-being and we know social supports act as a [buffer against difficult times](#).

Understanding [stress and distress responses](#) is an important way to

"normalize" our feelings, and the actions of others.

4. Trust and transparency

Clear, compassionate action and [transparent communication](#) from governments are also important. These things increase a sense of safety and potential for people to follow public health advice.

Hiding information leads to distrust in government and the media. This can [contribute](#) to mistrust in COVID-19 responses and lead to [non-compliance](#).

[A lack of information](#) and exposure to misinformation can also increase distress, and leave people vulnerable to [conspiracists](#) who target marginalized groups most at risk.

Rebuilding trust in an emergency may not be possible, but this is where [trusted community partners](#) become invaluable [mediators and sources of truth](#) for communities.

5. Cultural safety and responsiveness

Public health approaches and messaging needs to be appropriate and [sensitive](#) to local contexts.

Communities need health messaging that draws on cultural strengths to increase trust and access to services, such as the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled health organizations [quickly mobilized to take control of the local response to COVID-19](#).

6. Commitment to equity and human rights

[COVID-19 has not had the same impact on everyone](#). Many people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and refugee communities, are affected by historical and intergenerational trauma, racism, and ongoing socio-economic deprivation.

These things can be exacerbated in this current crisis. We must address the socio-cultural determinants that can impact people's health, such as insecure work and housing, and focus on equity.

7. Good communication

[Crisis communication principles](#) say messages are most likely to be effective when they are clear, credible and interactive, shared consistently, and targeted to community groups.

The public may [feel the need to seek information to](#) manage their anxiety, but [distressing content](#) can also increase their feelings of stress, confusion, and a lack of control, impacting their [ability to take action](#).

The media play a critical role here. Accessing trustworthy, reliable information through these channels is important so people know what action to take and where they can go for help.

8. Positive leadership

[Good governance](#) helps us feel safe. It's important for the government to be highly visible, provide regular updates and practical support, and help people understand and manage feelings of stress.

But we don't just need leadership from politicians and officials. [Local leaders](#) also need to support their communities to [process fear, grief and loss](#), and to help people understand the crisis will pass and there is hope.

This was on show when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organizations [took quick action to protect their communities from COVID-19](#).

9. Empowerment

[Individual and community empowerment](#) comes from having choice, voice, and control. This promotes the confidence to respond to an emergency, as well as resilience, hope and the ability to cope.

Communities that are [empowered](#) to play an active role in disaster response actually [recover better](#), with [lower rates of post-traumatic stress](#). However, communities must be [adequately resourced](#) to do this.

10. Holistic support

We need big [responses](#) that address health and safety, social and emotional well-being, community connectivity and cultural responsiveness to [improve quality of life, relationships and social functioning](#).

However, effective emergency responses must be embedded in well-functioning social systems, including emergency social and economic support and high-quality healthcare services everyone can access when needed.

Our next step will be to discuss these 10 principles with community members and public health experts in an October workshop, to develop a culturally responsive, trauma-informed, public health emergency framework for First Nations communities.

This pandemic is far from over and there is now a race to vaccinate

communities that have been left behind as states open up. A trauma-informed public health emergency response is possible. And with cases due to rise just as the next bushfire and cyclone seasons arrive, we need one now.

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