

GRIEF LEADERSHIP DURING COVID-19

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has put in perspective the need for leaders to prepare for disruption of work routines, anxiety within their communities and organizations, and even death of community members, friends, and team members. Understanding people's reactions to the losses associated with tragic events informs the roles that leaders can play in support of recovery. In the aftermath of traumatic events many people want to hear guidance from their community or organization leaders. During pandemics, leaders must

Understanding people's reactions to the losses associated with tragic events informs the roles that leaders can play in support of recovery.

attend to many responsibilities, including effective communication to those in their communities who have questions, seek reassurance, want to take action, or just want to know they are not alone in their grief.

As distress and anxiety turn to sorrow and mourning, leaders are responsible for identifying when communities are ready for the next step forward. Leaders know how best to speak the language of each community to help individuals, families, and care providers.

Communicate Effectively and Openly

Communicating effectively in crisis situations requires an understanding of very special concepts, principles, and practices. Leaders are encouraged to learn these approaches or have access to crisis communication specialists. Worry and distress can spread within communities affected by trauma, resulting in rumors and distortion of the event. Human loss can amplify these effects. Formal and informal leaders can be role models in sharing grief, communicating hope, managing rumors, and providing support to others.

Immediate Responses

Be visible — Make public announcements and appearances

Typical methods to promote visibility may not apply during pandemics. Novel and creative ways to use electronic and social media will be required. By providing useful and accurate information, leaders can re-establish a sense of safety and enhance the community's trust in leadership.

Provide accurate, timely information on what is known, what is not known, and when more information will be communicated

Press briefings, use of social media, and other vehicles can reassure individuals, families, and communities, and help dispel rumors. Be a credible source of information, direct people to other credible sources, and inform them when new information and resources become available.

Understand that people process information differently in high stress situations

When stressed, people have difficulty recalling more than a few main points and tend to focus on negative information. So keep messages simple, repeat frequently, and emphasize positive messaging.

Use multiple channels of communication

People seek information from multiple sources depending on age, culture, ethnicity, geography, community composition, and history. TV, newspapers, radio, religious leaders, teachers, and firefighters provide diverse channels for communication. Remember that in-person channels will be sharply curtailed during a pandemic so remote communication avenues are critical.

Speak calmly and encourage working together

Leaders promote calmness, empathy, optimism, a can-do attitude, and mutual support. By modeling the desired behavior and tone, leaders help others learn.

Communicate the status of existing and available resources

Monitor emerging needs, support fellow community leaders, and communicate resource availability and requirements. During and following a pandemic, available resources will change frequently and will require frequent updates. Guiding people to resources can instill confidence and credibility.

Continued

Organize memorial services and sites recognizing the diversity within the community

Respect the desires and needs of families who have sustained losses. During a pandemic, communicate clearly any changes to traditional funeral services, and acknowledge the hardship this places on families and communities. Shared rituals are important to promoting community cohesiveness and acknowledging shared loss. Pandemics require creative approaches.

Acknowledge grief

Tears and grieving in public by leaders give permission to others to express grief and humanizes unthinkable tragedies. Be aware that public displays of emotion may be variably accepted among cultures.

Recovery

Focus on future goals

Reorient the community to a future where disease is under control and life returns to normal. Be realistic about how long this takes, that the process is not linear, and that some things may never return to the way they were. Strong leaders need to adequately manage expectations.

Acknowledge those from within and outside the community who want to and do help

Establish a climate of healing and community support. Providing and receiving help can be difficult, therefore, it is important to promote the value of both.

Provide alternatives to blaming

Blame directed towards groups or individuals increases feelings of anger and the desire for retribution. Acknowledge feelings of anger, but redirect energy to providing support, solving problems, and moving forward.

Growing

Encourage a “new normal”

Work to return community activities to normal, but model tolerance and patience if recovery is slow. Set

and acknowledge achievable goals. Help the community understand the changing trajectory of recovery.

Promote cohesion

Expect community disappointment and anger after the initial sense of togetherness. Be alert to fault lines such as racial or socioeconomic differences within a community. These tend to expand and become areas for conflict. Avoid divisive language - identifying a “we and they”. Community rituals provide an opportunity for individuals and families to heal and reflect on their shared experience in their own style. These can cross racial, cultural, and socioeconomic divides.

Engage your own support

Take care of yourself. You need supporting staff, friends, and family who remind you to rest and can objectively advise you about personal needs you might overlook or neglect. Keep your advisors informed and listen to their perspectives.

Resources

Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
www.cstsonline.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov

National Child Traumatic Stress Network
www.nctsn.org

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
www.aacap.org

American Academy of Pediatrics
www.aap.org

American Psychiatric Association
www.psych.org

American Psychological Association
www.apa.org

American Red Cross
www.redcross.org



Center for the Study of Traumatic Stress
Department of Psychiatry
Uniformed Services University
4301 Jones Bridge Road, Bethesda, MD 20814-4799
www.CSTSONline.org