APA PRESIDENTIAL TASK FORCE

# CULTURALLY INFORMED TRAUMA AND GRIEF RECOVERY TOOLKIT

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

## Connection is Our Strength: Trauma, Grief, and Healing Among Asian & Pacific Islander Americans

*"It's hard to talk about racism with people outside of my community. People don't think that Asian people go through hardships. They think we are the model minority."*

Asian and Pacific Islander Americans (AAPIs) have ancestry in various regions spanning East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands. There is a great deal of diversity within AAPI communities with regard to national origin, ethnicity, language, and religion. In the midst of our communities' and our own strengths, we also endure hardships.

Historically, we have immigrated for different reasons, such as family reunification, search for educational and employment opportunities, discrimination, poverty, war, natural disasters, trafficking, and political and religious persecution. Many AAPI immigrants face hardships such as language and communication barriers, limited access to resources, navigating new cultural norms and shifting immigration policies. We also experience various forms of stereotyping and racism that are often invisible and neglected in U.S. society. For example, the prevalent myth of the "model minority" assumes that Asian Americans are academically and professionally successful, inherently smart, and that we don't experience stress or obstacles in U.S. society. The pressure to live up to these stereotypes can be crushing. Other harmful stereotypes, depending on ethnicity, include being passive, exotic, weak, criminal, or terrorist. AAPIs also face microaggressions, verbal abuse, bullying, and physical violence, such as in the case of South Asian Americans being targeted after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and in the case of East and Southeast Asian Americans being targeted during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In addition to these challenges, many AAPIs cope with violence, abuse, and neglect within their homes and communities, and these experiences can have negative impacts across the lifespan. Additionally, research tells us that many AAPIs who experience abuse and violence have limited resources to stop the violence and get adequate help. Within AAPI communities, survivors of violence and abuse can face pressure to keep what has happened to them a secret due to the shame and stigma that is attached to violence and abuse. For some, there are cultural expectations that make it hard to talk about violence and abuse with other people. For example, a woman may be told that she shouldn't talk about being abused to protect her family's reputation.

AAPIs also face loss and grief in ways that may be processed somewhat differently depending on cultural and religious beliefs. For instance, some people view the death of a loved one as both devastating and as connected with the deceased person's destiny or karma. The collectivistic orientation of many AAPIs often helps with grieving losses through religious or cultural rituals and gatherings. Loss can be experienced as something that an extended

family or community experiences, rather than only by a single person.

As AAPIs, we have both individual and collective strengths that help with trauma and grief. It's especially helpful when trauma and grief are recognized by loved ones, and when there is access to help from family, friends, spiritual or religious leaders, and mental health professionals (see resource on seeking help here). A strong support network helps with the isolation and stigma connected with trauma and grief. Finally, having support within and outside of one's community can be helpful. This is especially true when a person has been hurt within and outside of one's family and community, like being raped by someone in their ethnic community and facing racism outside of this community. Within the diversity of AAPI communities across generations, we can heal individually and collectively even while we may experience the pain of trauma and grief differently. For more information on interpersonal trauma, violence, and abuse, *see* here. To learn about collective trauma, *see* this. To learn more about how to heal and thrive, *go to* here.