CULTURALLY INFORMED TRAUMA AND GRIEF RECOVERY TOOLKIT

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Collective Trauma

Why do people suffer when their communities face oppression? Different forms of injustice can contribute to the stress faced by many people. Collective trauma is an event or series of events that impact not only one person but also a group of identified or targeted people. Collective trauma usually refers to traumas rooted in oppression or discrimination toward a minority group by a dominant group, in contrast to interpersonal trauma. However, the term, collective trauma, is sometimes used to include environmental disasters, violence (e.g., school shootings), and pandemics that affect people across different communities. Therefore, collective trauma refers to both traumatic interpersonal interactions between the minority and majority group members, such as gender-based violence, micro-(for example, insults), and macro-aggressions (e.g., hate crimes), and governmental and non-governmental systems perpetuating discrimination, war, political and religious persecution, trafficking, and torture.

There are three important considerations regarding collective trauma, including how long it may last, its impact, and the severity of problems between different racial, cultural, religious, or political groups. First, how long does collective trauma last? This can vary depending on the type of trauma. For example, discrimination due to gender, race, color, or religion can be a lifelong traumatization process. Many communities are victimized by violence and neglect across generations. For example, poverty and the lack of access to safe housing, healthcare, and education can have a lifelong impact on individuals, families, and communities.

Second, what is the impact of collective trauma? This may depend on what is called the "density" of overlapping traumas or intersectionality. Discrimination and bias based on factors such as gender, race, color, national origin, immigration status, social class, sexual orientation, religion, and disability are denser than discrimination or bias based only on race. For example, transwomen of color continue to be among the most targeted communities in the U.S. and globally.

Third, the severity of collective trauma influences how a person or a community experiences its effects. The harm or injury caused to a group or a community varies. Some examples of severe collective traumas include genocide of indigenous people, slavery, the incarceration of Japanese Americans in the Second World War, the Nazi Holocaust, violence against those perceived as Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11, and the separation of migrant children from their family members at the U.S./Mexico border.

Because collective trauma impacts a targeted group, any traumatic event experienced by one group member, like George Floyd's murder, is observed and witnessed in the media by other group members who can experience parts of the traumatic event as their own. Another example is that the violence and harassment of Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic have raised anxiety among many Asian Americans who may not have been directly targeted. In addition, what happened to parents and grandparents can be transmitted cross-generationally through similar dynamics, especially in

genocides and slavery. Collective trauma that occurred in the past can be powerful and may affect a community's sense of safety across generations. For example, historical and ongoing police brutality and White supremacy directed against African Americans and Black Americans have left a mark such that families and communities remain highly alert about their safety, which can affect their sense of belonging in U.S. society.

Healing the wounds of collective trauma is a challenge that requires supporting each other, and fighting together to achieve social justice.