

# FOSTERING COMMUNITY WELLNESS: ADDRESSING TOXIC STRESS AND ADVERSE COMMUNITY EVENTS

## A Fact Sheet for Behavioral Health Providers

This fact sheet offers behavioral health providers who serve individuals with mental and/or substance use disorders and other community-based organizations guidance to increase understanding and responses to the impact of toxic stress and community trauma on individuals with serious mental illness. By better understanding toxic stress and “adverse community events,” providers and communities can support the health and wellness of individuals with serious mental illness, contributing to broader community wellness. Behavioral health providers are in the unique position to help strengthen or support resilience among those they serve. “Resilience refers to the ability of an individual, family, or community to cope with adversity and trauma, and adapt to challenges or change.”<sup>1</sup> This fact sheet suggests three strategies for behavioral health providers serving individuals exposed to toxic stress and community trauma.

### What Do Toxic Stress and Community Trauma Have to Do with Mental Health?

Adverse community experiences may influence treatment planning processes and individual outcomes. Understanding and addressing the impact of community trauma can help support the recovery process and reveal and/or support resilience of individuals and communities. Similar to experiencing trauma at the individual level, trauma at the community level can shape the health and mental health of entire communities—even generations of communities. The experiences can range from natural disasters to social conditions, and civil unrest to mass shootings.

In addition to events, adverse community experiences also include ongoing conditions such as “lack of opportunity, limited economic mobility, fear of discrimination, and the associated effects of poverty and joblessness that contribute to – and compound – the adversities experienced by individuals and families.”<sup>2</sup> People with serious mental illness often face these experiences. For example, an estimated 9.8 million adults aged 18 or older in the U.S. had a serious mental illness in 2015, including 2.5 million adults living below the poverty line.<sup>3</sup>

When serving individuals with serious mental illness, it is important to consider the broader context of people’s lives as part of effective prevention efforts, treatment planning, and service delivery.

Behavioral health providers regularly work with people who have personal histories of toxic stress and trauma; and may already be addressing these issues in treatment. Adverse community experiences can contribute to the resurfacing or re-experiencing of past trauma for some people; or bring about a new response to a new set of losses, fears, and horror for others. Community trauma may further the vulnerability of already vulnerable populations (i.e. individuals with serious mental illness, substance use disorders, or those experiencing homelessness). However, these events may also provide opportunities for those impacted to help support and promote resilience for others.

**What is Toxic Stress?**  
Occasional stress is healthy and normal; however, “stress that is prolonged, severe, or chronic, can cause significant problems with health and development.”<sup>4</sup> Stress that creates additional challenges for a person’s functioning is known as toxic stress,<sup>5</sup> creating potential challenges over a lifespan.<sup>6</sup> When toxic stress is the result of an adverse community experience, such as a natural disaster or mass shooting incident, community members may be impacted in different ways, and some will experience trauma and its symptoms.

**What is Trauma?**  
“Trauma is a common experience for adults and children in American communities, and it is especially common in the lives of people with mental health and substance use disorders. SAMHSA describes individual trauma as resulting from ‘an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.’”<sup>7</sup>



# Promoting Resilience: Three Strategies for Reducing the Effects of Adverse Community Experiences

## 1. Be Culturally Responsive

Cultural responsiveness is providing meaningful attention to the cultural identities of individuals and groups and understanding the importance of those identities in a process of healing from toxic stress and trauma. This understanding is systematically incorporated into providers' services, policies, structures, and environments. It requires being interested in, learning about, and acknowledging the vast ways people express their cultural identities, values, connections, and experiences in an effort to provide services that are in alignment and resonate with people's lives and practices.<sup>8</sup>

**Learn More!**  
**Cultural Activation**  
You can learn more about being culturally responsive with SAMHSA's Program to Achieve Wellness training series on Cultural Activation. Visit <https://www.samhsa.gov/wellness-initiative/webinars-newsletters> to access the series and stream the presentations on SAMHSA's YouTube Channel!

Being culturally responsive in treatment and support planning requires exploration and understanding of the meaning people make of what has happened to them. The process includes working collaboratively to create relationships and environments that feel physically and emotionally safe. It helps to ask about:

- Community connections (places they feel safe)
- Changes in support systems because of community events
- Who in the community supports the individual and their recovery
- Whether new supports need to be created
- Beliefs and traditions that might result in connecting with others who share those beliefs, practices, values, or histories

These conversations can create opportunities for inclusion of people who are vulnerable, isolated, or marginalized.

## 2. Recognize Strengths and Resiliency

Individuals and communities have strengths to draw on in times of distress. The resilience already existing in individuals and communities is a powerful resource for healing. Community experience and research show that there are some factors that appear to support and enhance resiliency, like: having a supportive community, feeling valued, engaging with others in positive ways, and having a sense of belonging.<sup>9</sup> As service providers, it is important to think about and plan for a person's vulnerabilities in the wake of adverse community events. Though, a strengths-based approach is also necessary to create a plan that maximizes individual skills and abilities to foster recovery.

### Understanding Adverse Community Experiences

Community wellness can be impacted by adverse community events. Adverse community events and conditions can impact individuals, at-risk populations, and entire communities in many ways. It is important for behavioral health and other community service providers to consider these experiences during treatment and service planning for individuals with serious mental illness. Community members' resiliencies hold valuable resources for hope, healing, and recovery that contribute to wellness and restoration.

Planning can include:

- Naming the stressors related to community trauma and exploring the impacts
- Reviewing strategies that have helped in the past
- Discussing current and new tools and resources, including things that can be learned and shared with others



When adverse community events occur, there are community members and organizations that respond by making positive contributions. Following the events of September 11, 2001 and hurricanes Katrina and Rita, people with lived experience involving trauma and mental illness were actively involved in training thousands of crisis counselors, providing peer support, and working in their communities to help others. Identifying and incorporating the strengths, skills, and talents that individuals can bring to assist others into service planning could be helpful to the individual and to the community as a whole. During and after an adverse event, members of vulnerable populations may have needed skills to support others and to effectively lead.

### 3. Encourage Involvement in Community Action

Community activation means engaging community members in a process of healing. Recovering from adverse community experiences takes time and an inclusive approach: everyone in the community has a role in restoring hope and well-being. During times of adversity, any person can feel motivated to act on behalf of their community. For individuals with serious mental illness and others, “collective self-efficacy can help improve mental health.”<sup>10</sup> Collective efficacy relates to a group’s, e.g. community’s, beliefs in their ability to create change. Strategies for encouraging involvement in community action and promoting collective self-efficacy include involving local leaders and community members in mental health planning to increase participation efforts.

When planning for treatment and supports, providers can encourage participants to engage in community responses because it supports both individual and collective recovery and it can take many different forms depending upon interests and capabilities. People who have experienced peer support related to mental illness can bring those skills as resources to the broader community and offer places where focus on support, empathy, and shared experience are more widely available. For example, when a natural disaster occurs and individuals become displaced or otherwise experience changes in their communities, peers can serve the valuable role of connecting individuals with mental illness to treatment providers and supports, help resolve insurance and paperwork needs, assist with finding pharmacies to help with medication refills, and otherwise provide support for overall health, mental health, and wellness.

People who are willing to act for the common good have a role in strengthening networks and social norms, establishing trust, and promoting community connection and a culture that supports health and safety.<sup>11</sup> When combined with looking for strengths and resiliencies, becoming involved as part of an activated community can provide people with opportunities for meaningful action.

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An increased understanding of toxic stress and adverse community experience can help behavioral health providers better meet the wellness needs of individuals with serious mental illness. These three strategies can help reduce the effects of adverse community events, fostering resiliency and recovery for individuals with serious mental illness. **To learn more about fostering community wellness, contact SAMHSA’s Program to Achieve Wellness for free technical assistance at [paw@prainc.com](mailto:paw@prainc.com).**



## References

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