

# How to respond to traumatic or critical incidents:

## Information for service providers

### Purpose

This tool supports service providers and frontline workers who respond to critical or traumatic incidents in the community. It is part of the Post-Incident Neighbourhood Support Network Framework toolkit from Crime Prevention Ottawa. This document does not replace existing internal protocols that you may have to follow when an incident occurs. Instead, it provides suggestions to help you respond more effectively to critical incidents.

### What is a critical incident?

A critical incident is “a sudden, unexpected and personally upsetting criminal event that is powerful enough to potentially overwhelm and dismantle the natural coping mechanisms of an individual or a community.”<sup>i</sup> While it may be traumatic for some communities, others come together to support one another.

### Understanding trauma

There are four types of trauma:

- **Single incident trauma.** This is a standalone traumatic event, such as a car accident, natural disaster, or violent crime.
- **Complex or repetitive trauma.** This involves multiple traumas that happen over a period of time, such as exposure to war or ongoing abuse.
- **Intergenerational trauma.** These traumas are experienced by people who are related to someone who has a history of trauma. Children of abuse survivors, for example.
- **Historical or collective trauma.** These large-scale traumas impact a group of people across generations, such as slavery, colonialism and genocide.

### Supporting people in the community

It's important to understand the different types of trauma. The post-incident response should consider all categories of trauma. These traumas play into a person's or community's capacity to cope. What may be an isolated incident for one person could be a serious trigger for another.

### A trauma-informed approach

Knowing that there are underlying traumas that influence how communities and individuals react to critical incidents helps to build an effective response.

Consider the following:

- **Trauma awareness.** Understand that trauma is common and impacts the ways that people cope. It can also influence people's physical and mental health.
- **Safety and trustworthiness.** Trauma often leads to a lack of trust. It is important to make people feel physically and emotionally safe after an incident.

- **Collaboration and connection.** Use open communication, encourage people to share their feelings and find ways to collaborate. This gives community members a sense of control. It's also important to build meaningful connections between community members and service providers.
- **Coping skills.** Focus on helping people impacted by trauma to build resiliency and strengthen their coping skills.<sup>ii</sup>

Effective trauma response is not only about what should be done, but also what shouldn't be done. For example:

- Avoid trying to immediately "fix" the impact of a trauma.
- Do not take a one-size fits all approach to trauma. Some people may want to discuss their trauma, while others will not.
- Be clear on what messaging and information you can speak to.
- Never assume people will use the information they are given to make changes for themselves.
- Be mindful of your body language and facial expressions. You don't want to communicate distress or shock in front of people experiencing trauma.<sup>iii</sup>

## Steps to take to help the community

### STEP 1: Use the Post-Incident Neighbourhood Support Framework

The first step of any post-incident response is to identify a network lead. This is typically a local Community Health and Resource Centre. It is also important to identify who needs support. For example, a shooting at a mosque may have far-reaching impacts on a cultural community, while a shooting in an apartment building may only impact the building and neighbourhood surrounding it. Initial responses should take place within 72 hours of an event.

### STEP 2: Identify who may be impacted

People react to incidents differently. People who witness a violent incident will likely be impacted differently than those who live several blocks away from the site of an event. This does not mean that a post-incident response is less important for one person than the other. Familiarize yourself with likely reactions to trauma.

### **STEP 3: Connect with the community**

A service provider's first step is often door knocks. These are more successful when you do the following:

- Map out the neighbourhood to determine who has been impacted and who needs information.
- Distribute materials such as flyers, information sheets and other resources.
- Deliver a consistent message and ensure that everyone receives the same information.
- Don't immediately bring up the incident. Some people may not be aware of it, so informing them could create fear.
- If people don't answer the door, follow up a couple of days later.
- Don't leave information kits unattended at doors.

Ask the following:

- What are your friends and neighbours saying?
- Who have you been hearing from (i.e. family members, neighbours, etc.)?
- Who is missing from the conversations?

Pay attention to body language as well as what people say. Listen to residents and support their requests. Some people will not be as explicit, and it's important not to push them. Always provide a safe atmosphere for people to manage trauma. Try to connect with people who may not be aware of available resources.

Your door knocks will offer important insight into the community's response to an incident. Strive to gather insights from community associations, tenant groups and community programs. Another way to reach people is to post flyers and information in high-traffic locations and on community websites, blogs and social media channels.

### **STEP 4: Take action**

As a starting point, be sure that you understand the information you've gathered:

- Are there specific asks?
- What resources can you give to people in need?

Next, put some plans into action. Keep in mind that there are several levels to trauma that can arise after a critical incident: individual, interpersonal and community.<sup>iv</sup> It is important to understand the trauma you are dealing with and address it appropriately. In addition to being aware of trauma-informed principles, you may wish to take additional training in post-crisis response. Courses such as Psychological First Aid are a good starting point.<sup>v</sup>

Here are some strategies that can help you put plans into action:

### **Support for individuals**

- Read between the lines and pay attention to body language as well as words.
- Familiarize yourself with the “normal” reactions to trauma.<sup>vi</sup>
- Create a safe space and encourage individual participation. Some residents may not want to participate in group discussions or activities. This is fine.
- Encourage volunteerism as this gives people an opportunity for collaboration, a sense of accomplishment and can lessen the negative impacts of trauma.<sup>vii</sup>
- Allow for healing to happen in its own time. Offer support and follow-up as needed. Activities may include one-on-one conversations or sharing information about community resources. Short-term activities that may be taken in the first two weeks include educational sessions that focus on stress, coping skills and social interactions.

Immediate activities may include:

- Hold one-on-one conversations
- Share information about community resources and referrals
- Take steps to address immediate needs, such as food, clothing and shelter

Short-term activities (24 hours to 2 weeks) may include:

- Host educational sessions (for example: stress responses, coping skills)
- Hold programs focused on social interactions<sup>viii</sup>
- Maintain visibility with residents to allow for continued outreach and support

### **Interpersonal activities**

- Help residents build interpersonal relationships that lead to resiliency. This can lead to healing and a sense of trust for people. Peer support plays a part.
- Identify someone who can advocate on behalf of the community and act as a source of information for other community members. Activities may include group support and one-on-one counseling. Other helpful activities are meditation, leadership training and cultural celebrations.

Short-term activities (24 hours to 2 weeks) may include:

- Community development initiatives that focus on sharing positive experiences and mutual support. This can include fun social programming.<sup>ix</sup>

## Community support

- Maintaining trust between service providers and residents is important. Trust is often tested by a critical incident.
- Focus community building initiatives on the strengths and assets of the community. Draw on resident experiences, expertise and knowledge.
- Maintain reliable communication and visibility as this will help to strengthen relationships.
- Plan other community building activities, such as hosting a community celebration and organizing cross-cultural events.
- Discuss the checklist of trauma reactions and identify residents who may benefit from referral to a social worker or counsellor.

## STEP 5: Follow-up

Follow-up is important to determine lasting impacts. Long-term follow-up should focus on building and maintaining trust and fostering leadership among residents.

Even in cases where the community did not need additional support related to the critical incident, it is important to follow-up to determine the lasting impacts on the community. Despite being given resources and opportunities to engage, many choose not to do so until much later.<sup>x</sup>

The “normal” responses to trauma become indicators of a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder response when they continue to take place 3 weeks<sup>xi</sup> to one month later. As such, it is important to do intentional follow-ups with residents.

Be sure to reach out to residents who have not made efforts to engage with the community or with network partners since the traumatic event. This is a good time to discuss the checklist of trauma reactions with residents to identify those who may benefit from referrals to social workers or counsellors.

## STEP 6: Evaluate your response

The evaluation phase is a good opportunity to reflect on what's been learned from the community and the changes that have taken place. The goal of an effective trauma-informed response is not to treat the trauma or make the community better, but to re-establish what was there before the incident happened.

Consider the following questions: <sup>xii</sup>

- Did we reach out to those who should have been contacted?
- Were there people we were unable to reach?
- What were the barriers we faced to reaching people?
- How can we address those barriers?
- Did we identify everyone who needed support?
- Did the activities reflect the needs of the community?
- Did the activities include people from the impacted groups?
- What gaps did we identify and how did we address them?

*Please refer to Appendix H of the Post-Incident Neighbourhood Support Network Framework for more information.*

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<sup>i</sup> Crime Prevention Ottawa. *Post-Incident Neighbourhood Support Network – Framework for Implementation*, 2017, available at [www.crimepreventionottawa.ca](http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca).

<sup>ii</sup> BC Provincial Mental Health and Substance Abuse Planning Council. *Trauma-Informed Practice Guide*, 2013.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Weinstein, E., Wolin, J., and Rose, S. *Trauma Informed Community Building: A Model for Strengthening Community in Trauma Affected Neighborhoods*, 2014.

<sup>v</sup> Johns Hopkins University course, available on the Coursera website: [www.coursera.org/learn/psychological-first-aid](http://www.coursera.org/learn/psychological-first-aid).

<sup>vi</sup> Crime Prevention Ottawa. *Neighbourhood Trauma: What to do When a Violent or Traumatic Incident Happens*, 2017, available at [www.crimepreventionottawa.ca](http://www.crimepreventionottawa.ca).

<sup>vii</sup> Hoffman, M.A. and Kruczek, T. *A Biological Model of Mass Trauma: Individual, Community and Societal Effects*, 2011.

<sup>viii</sup> National Institute of Mental Health. *Mental Health and Mass Violence: Evidence-Based Early Intervention for Victims of Mass Violence*, 2001.

<sup>ix</sup> HOPE SF Learning Centre, *Trauma Informed Community Building Evaluation*, 2015.

<sup>x</sup> Richards, D.A. "A Field Study of Critical Incident Debriefing Versus Critical Incident Stress Management," *Journal of Mental Health*, 2009.

<sup>xi</sup> Voices of September 11<sup>th</sup>, *Preparing for After: How to Help Victims of Mass Violence*, 2014.

