

Collective Trauma: A Global Impact

With the worldwide COVID pandemic and most recently the war in Ukraine the term **collective trauma** is being used in many discussions. Collective Trauma is defined as the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society.

Collective Trauma is not a new experience just currently being more recognized. Collective Trauma has occurred in many societies over centuries. Historically societies have experienced collective trauma during the holocaust, multiple genocide actions, racial and ethnic internments, invasions, and wars. The current extensive media technology advancements have expanded communication of collective trauma situations allowing more people to be both aware and impacted by the traumatic situations.

The worldwide COVID pandemic is the most recent event that has created a global impact on all generations. This “Collective trauma” has affected children’s developmental growth including mental health and formal education. This will have an impact on children’s emotional stability, academic learning, future employment, and relationships. The global pandemic has also impacted family dynamics, work/lifestyles, healthcare, and world economics.

The current conflict in Ukraine is creating collective trauma for all Ukraine residents and their families both in Ukraine and around the world. Due to the expansive media coverage and the involvement by other countries collective trauma in relation to Ukraine is also being experienced by people globally. While the Ukraine situation is creating collective trauma it is also being experienced by people in other crisis environment such as Syria, Afghanistan, and areas of Africa.

Understanding Collective Trauma is only the first step. Individually, by community and globally we must create methods of supporting people and societies as we begin to heal from the collective trauma experience. This is called Collective Recovery.

In a 2002 [article](#), Psychiatrist Judith L. Herman highlighted that the road to trauma recovery can be divided up into 3 stages:

Stage 1 – Safety & Stabilization. In this stage, individuals, communities, and societies focus on establishing or re-establishing a sense of safety and stability. Predominantly driven by the limbic fight or flight response, the focus is on immediate actions that can be taken to increase the sense of security and decrease risk of harm and vulnerability. We witnessed this behavior during the pandemic with stockpiling of essentials and currently in Ukraine through the seeking of safe shelter in and out of the country.

Stage 2 – Remembrance and Mourning. In this stage of trauma recovery, individuals, communities, and societies begin to face the ways in which they have been impacted by the traumatic event. Marked by a development in awareness, individuals, families, and larger groups begin to acknowledge and grieve the losses brought on by the traumatic event. They start to feel the emotional impact more acutely. This stage can be marked with an oscillation between a mix of emotions and numbness as individuals, families and communities move further into rebuilding the story around the painful event. This occurred during the pandemic with an increase in anxiety, sleeplessness, and other mental health reactions. We are witnessing this in the Ukraine crisis through the sharing of family stories, emotional separations and reunifications.

Stage 3 – Reconnection & Integration. In this stage, individuals, communities, and societies begin to assemble a new vision of their lives and themselves in relation to the event. The traumatic event will always remain a part of their world but is no longer the focal point or the center of personal and societal experience. In this stage, emotional responses become better understood and more effectively managed. The ability to create one's own reality becomes paramount and creates a foundation of hope for the future. We are witnessing this in the follow up decisions being made now that the crisis level of the pandemic is subsiding. Individuals and families are reassessing lifestyle and work/life balance. Career choices are changing. Communities and societies are investing differently in education, business, and global relationships. The Ukraine crisis is too current at this stage to see major collective recovery activities but there is movement in individuals, families, and smaller communities. Families are resettling in new regions and countries. As a nation, Ukrainians are reaffirming their values and commitment to the vision for their nation.

Collective Trauma can have a swift and strong impact in a relatively short period of time. Collective Recovery is a slow, lifelong process with many changing experiences. Individuals, communities, and the global society will each have a role to play as the world recovers from a Collective trauma. We have all been impacted and we must support each other in recovery as we heal knowing that while we all have been changed there is hope for an improved world future.

“Our human compassion binds us the one to the other - not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learnt how to turn our common suffering into hope”. Nelson Mandela