



Mental Health Association in New York State, Inc.

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Responding to COVID-19 Collective Trauma

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Collective trauma is a psychological trauma experienced by a group of people of any size, up to and including an entire society in response to a mass traumatizing event. Examples of events that have resulted in collective trauma include the Holocaust, slavery in the United States, the Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the September 11, 2001 attacks. One researcher describes the collective traumatic event as “a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society. Aside from the horrific loss of life, collective trauma is also a crisis of meaning.”¹

In anticipation of the mental health needs of frontline health and mental health care workers due to collective trauma associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, MHANYS is calling on the Executive and the State Legislature to support proactive, trauma informed interventions to assure the health, well-being and recovery of these vital health professionals.

Mental health researchers are already anticipating that there will be collective trauma associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. In the broadest sense this collective trauma will be experienced globally, but more specifically collective trauma will be experienced disproportionately by certain subgroups of people exposed more directly to the impact of the pandemic, such as health and mental health care workers. Anticipating the mental health needs of these workers is vital, not only for their own personal well-being, but to assure that these valuable workers will recover and be healthy and able to continue serving others, including those also impacted by the pandemic.

At this time, it is uncertain how long this pandemic will last or how long it will be before some sense of normalcy is restored. It is critical, however, to plan now for mental health interventions to be put in place in anticipation of the emotional and psychological needs of these front-line workers. Based on our knowledge of trauma, and by extension collective trauma, we can anticipate that many of these individuals will experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression and substance use disorders. The impact of these disorders will include absenteeism, disability and unemployment, which compounds health care and mental health care access issues, personal suffering and suicide.

MHANYS is committed to the preparation of supportive interventions to be in place ahead of the expected impact of the COVID-19 and the aftermath associated with the pandemic. Responding to trauma early is critical for helping to assure timely recovery. Waiting until the symptoms of

¹ Hirschberger, G. (2018) Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning. *Frontiers in Psychology*.

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collective trauma to appear is too late. Examples of trauma informed mental health supports that could be made available through legislative initiative include:

- Creation of a feedback mechanism, such as workplace and worker surveys, to track the impact of COVID-19 associated collective trauma and the needs of the health care and mental health care workforce;
- Trauma informed workplace wellness resources in the form of training opportunities for health and mental health organizations on how best to support the mental health and wellness of their impacted employees;
- Trauma informed wellness learning opportunities for front line health and mental health care workers;
- COVID-19 mental health and wellness information hotline designed to inform and direct impacted health and mental health workers experiencing symptoms associated with COVID-19 to appropriate resources;
- Public Service Announcements (PSAs) designed to broadcast trauma informed wellness resources made available through this legislative initiative.

Recommendation: MHANYS urges the Executive and the Legislature to take immediate steps to prepare for the delivery of trauma informed mental health and wellness resources to support the anticipated needs of health care and mental health care workers impacted by collective trauma associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.