

Recovering from Collective Trauma

As we started work on this quarterly edition of LifeLines, we considered potential articles that would be of interest to our readers. Unfortunately, the topic presented itself after our nation was hammered with yet another mass school shooting, resulting in the deaths of 19 children and two teachers. Lives were cut short, creating gaping wounds in the hearts of families and friends. This gut-wrenching event came just eight days after a mass shooting at a grocery store where ten innocent people were gunned down because of the color of their skin.

These are just two of the most recent national traumas that are being piled on an entire population. Other instances to consider include the social upheaval and protests that found their genesis in centuries of racism and oppression after the high-profile deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor.

Also in our collective conscience is the real time viewing of the assault on the symbol of our democracy with the storming of the United States capitol January 6, 2021. Spreading beyond our country's borders is the slaughtering of civilians and unbridled destruction of Ukraine. Globally we have faced unimaginable numbers of dead from an unseen enemy that continues to morph as a grim reaper, cutting swaths of death through countries, communities, and families.

Whereas trauma typically refers to the impact that a traumatic incident has had on an individual, collective trauma refers to the impact of a traumatic occurrence that affects entire groups of people, communities, or societies. In simple terms, it is a shared emotional reaction to a terrible event. The distress found in such collective experiences may precipitate sweeping changes in societal functioning or governmental policies. Consider the changes that occurred in travel after the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

While such traumas are dealt with collectively, each person within the group affected will be impacted differently. As the pandemic raged on and our daily lives and the normal way of doing things was turned upside down, thousands of scientists were mobilized to create vaccines to halt the virus and millions bolted into action to find workarounds for schools and businesses. Sadly, some individuals channeled their anger, hate, and frustration into attacking anonymous

individuals who looked like they may have come from China, the reputed source of the virus.

There is limited empirical data on the consequences of cumulative, collective trauma; much more research has uncovered the effects of compounding adversities in individuals. Science now understands that chronic (long-lasting) trauma will adversely affect an individual's physical and mental health over a lifetime. Before the pandemic, it was estimated that 3.5 percent of Americans were diagnosed with PTSD annually. Whether the pandemic stress levels will rise to the classification of PTSD remains to be seen. No doubt, almost everyone who has lived through the pandemic will have an increased stress level, particularly among those who find themselves in the lower socioeconomic groups. The pandemic has shone a spotlight on the economic and racial inequities in healthcare and essential services. But let us not confine ourselves to just the toll the pandemic has taken on the collective whole. All the horrendous situations that we have experienced in the past two years have increased the stress levels among society as well as the individual people who are woven into the fabric of that society.



Collective symptoms of trauma in the events mentioned previously can be seen in distancing ourselves internally from what is experienced. Sequestering the emotions from the traumatic event can assist in not being swept away by those powerful feelings but can also lead to rumination of negative events. Hypervigilance intensifies, as we constantly scan the

environment for both seen and unseen potential threats to our survival. There has been tremendous pressure to get back to normal, but our normal has explicitly been changed forever.

Collective trauma can be more insidious in that traumatic events build up over time so that we become numb to the life-changing events as a way of coping. We may lose perspective and empathy for suffering human beings. Continuous media exposure to the retelling of the story can deplete our empathy as well as physical, mental, and emotional energy. In many cases we are watching the events unfold in real-time without the benefit of judicious editing.

Common responses to a traumatic event can be centered in the body, with a person having headaches, dizziness, rapid heart rate, or nausea. Intense feelings can also occur leaving a person feeling overwhelmed, irritable, shocked, or jumpy. Relationships with loved ones or friends can become strained as you may wish to withdraw and isolate from others while you process what happened. Hearing a particular sound or smelling an odor that was associated with a traumatic event can trigger a very strong physical or emotional reaction. Remember, all these reactions are normal and yet will vary from person to person based on previous exposure and resiliency.

Communities tend to know what to do when tragedy strikes as seen in the memorials created with flowers, photos, and stuffed animals. Prayer vigils with candles are another example of communities taking the first tentative steps toward moving forward in the wake of traumatic events. Groups gather to talk about the event, and support systems of like victims rise like a phoenix from the ashes of renewal.

In some countries or communities, to minimize the potential for a tragedy to reoccur, swift and sweeping legislation has been put into effect in record time that bolsters the social contract—the agreement among members of a society to give up some freedoms to secure the safety and wellbeing of the whole.

Human contact is central to healing. By helping others navigate suffering, individuals can regain a sense of power through meaningful work, being of service to others, or engaging in spiritual practices. Resiliency can be promoted at an individual level which in turn benefits the group.

Children need to be kept close to adults after a traumatic event, providing them the freedom to talk about what happened. Make sure you monitor their media exposure. The trauma may have arisen from being targeted because of someone's identity; acknowledge that and validate their emotions. Use language that is understandable for the child's developmental age. Behavior may regress, or a child may become withdrawn, or behavior may change; be patient. Access therapy for the child with someone who is familiar with trauma or seek out supportive people to be allies. Above all, provide structure and routine to give children a feeling of predictability. Collaborate with the child and see what would help them feel safe. Remember, for anyone experiencing a traumatic event, the routine of daily life has been shattered; it will take time to rebuild a sense of safety. Continue to check in; often, the trauma can continue with no specific end. Understand that expectations may need to be adjusted as the child works through big emotions.

Building resiliency requires several steps. It is important to take the time to grieve and explore the thoughts and

feelings surrounding a traumatic event, rather than sweeping them under a rug, where an accumulation can eventually cause a trip hazard. In time, stuffed, uncomfortable emotions will create additional barriers to healing. If you have been glued to media, now would be the time to limit your exposure to the perpetual coverage. It is important that individuals try to find the positive in a traumatic event, such as the solidification of community identity or the mutual support given after a natural disaster. Lessons learned from our pasts can help us to navigate traumatic events that are an inevitable part of living. Seek out people who are good for you; believe in your own power to affect change. A priority is to take time for self-care, even if it is in tiny doses throughout the day. Lastly, it is important to move forward with a sense of gratitude for both the large and small things that have graced our lives.





Go Play Outside!

How many of us heard these words almost every day as children? They bring back memories of tree climbing, back yard discovery missions, games of tag, or kick the can. This is something missing in the lives of many young people today, especially following the pandemic. Being outdoors has a lot of benefits. So just what can we gain from spending time outside regularly and how do we help encourage our kids to reconnect with nature?

Time outdoors offers so many things for free, including exercise, an appreciation of nature, the opportunity to take risks, socialize with others in less structured environments, and soak in vitamin D, a nutrient that benefits bone development, immune system function, mood, and healthy sleep. Being in nature inspires creativity and forces our kids to learn to entertain themselves. Engaging in unstructured play fosters cooperation, sharing, negotiation, and skills needed to form new friendships. Kids need a balance of time alone as well as time with others.

Research shows that children who spend time outside every day have better coordination and muscle strength, a healthier body mass index (BMI), and form good habits for life. These kids grow their observational skills while engaging all their senses as opposed to being involved in more passive activities. The more children are outside and gain an appreciation of nature, the more likely they will become invested in its conservation.

We probably all know the benefits of being outside, but we may not know the definitive connection between mindfulness and the outdoors. Nature offers an opportunity to slow our mind and bring our attention to what we are experiencing in the moment. This results in decreased stress and a better ability to focus. Additionally, the space we are in outside is much larger than anywhere we would be indoors and having more space between people decreases conflict. So, the next time everyone is bickering with one another, head outside! If nothing else, it might provide the neighbors with

entertainment. With the weather warming up, there is no better time than the present to establish a new habit of regular outdoor activity.

How can we encourage kids to be outside? A simple plan is just to take your regular activities outdoors. For example, eat meals on the porch or back deck or play board games or card games at an outdoor table. On hot days, grab the hose and fill up some water balloons or put a pool at the end of the slide. Sometimes even teens like to play on a playground, and kids of widely varying ages enjoy finding fun new treasures while geocaching (there are free apps for that - just search in your mobile app store). Bring a basketball or baseball and mitt to the park. The recreational center in your area and your local parks department offer fun, free options.

St. Louis County Parks Programs and Activities:

<https://stlouiscountymo.gov/st-louis-county-departments/parks/programs-activities/>

St. Charles Parks Summer Activity Guide:

<https://www.sccmo.org/232/Parks-Recreation>

To find your local recreation council which typically has a free activity newsletter and may have funds available for children with developmental differences:

<https://recreationcouncil.org/>

It takes a little effort and planning but no matter what, modeling is important. The best thing we can do to help our kids get outside is to do so ourselves. Just as it is with eating vegetables, if our kids see us spending time outside, they are much more likely to try it. Parents often report that spending time outside brings more peace to their families. Check it out and Go Play Outside. . . You'll be glad you did!



safer, healthier relationships
for children and families

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Our Vision

FamilyForward leads the community in providing innovative solutions for advancing safer, healthier relationships for children and families.

Our Mission

FamilyForward moves vulnerable children in the direction of hope by delivering comprehensive therapeutic and educational services to support biological, foster, and adoptive families.

Visit familyforwardmo.org/publications to read LifeLines online.

Educational Opportunities for Adoptive and Foster Parents

FamilyForward will complete renovations and move to our new home late August/early September, so flexibility is key. Some classes will be held virtually, other classes will be held in person at the Creve Coeur location, with the potential to be moved to a virtual format if necessary. All registrants will be kept apprised of the situation as we navigate this period of growth and transition. When registering, please provide your most current phone number and email address to facilitate communication.

Here's to a great summer!

Impact of Strangers Under Your Roof

Tuesday, July 19, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

This training explores the impact that occurs when a family introduces a foster or adoptive child into the home. Family dynamics are changed, priorities shift, and social activities are transformed because of a new person being incorporated into an existing family structure. Unmet expectations are often a source of angst for all family members. Parents will learn the predictable developmental stages of resource families and how the unit can be moved toward mobilization in the quest for a new and more satisfying reality for the family. Virtual.

Trauma Informed Parenting for Success (TIPS I and II)

Wednesday, July 27 and Thursday, August 25, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

This series of classes takes a closer look at the six core strengths required for healthy child development as outlined by Dr. Bruce Perry, of The ChildTrauma Academy. CTA believes that health promotion is violence prevention. The training focuses on how parents can facilitate these strengths after a child has experienced a traumatic beginning. Attachment is the foundation with which all other strengths are built including self-regulation, affiliation, attunement, tolerance, and respect. This is an excellent refresher course after taking FamilyForward's Parenting KIDS. In person.

Humor in Parenting

Tuesday, August 2, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

Humor is a handy tool in life's toolbox and it is essential when you are parenting children with challenges. The class will explore the nature of humor and how to incorporate it into your parenting repertoire. In person.

Trauma and Its Impact in the Classroom

Thursday, August 4, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

This class reviews the impact of trauma on a child's development and how it relates and manifests within the school setting. Practical tips for providing a trauma sensitive environment are covered. Parents are encouraged to invite their child's teachers to attend. In person.

Creating Lifebooks

Tuesday, August 16, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

Lifebooks are an important tool to help children who are in foster care or adopted connect the past, present, and future. Identity development and attachment can be facilitated using this tool. Class focuses on the demonstration of age-appropriate activities and tools that will help children understand their life story from a strength-based perspective. In person.

Parental Regulation

Monday, August 29, 2022 | 6:00 – 8:30 pm

Parenting challenging children can be, well, a challenge. This training will explore the components to parental regulation and how to regulate yourself using a variety of techniques to successfully model those behaviors for our children. This is a lesson from the CORE Teen Training curriculum. In person

Points Along the Adoption Circle

Tuesday, September 6, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

The experience of adoption creates a unique and lasting emotional and psychological impact on the lives of all who are touched by it. This class gives participants a chance to consider various perspectives of those linked to one another through adoption including birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees, including extended family members. The focus will be on deepening the insight, awareness, empathy, and practical ways to care for all members in the adoption circle. This class is designed for any who care for children at any point along the adoption journey. In person.

Conquering the Stress Monster

Friday, September 16, 2022 | Lunch and Learn | 12:00 – 1:00 pm

This hour-long presentation examines factors that cause stress in our lives and evidence-based techniques to provide stress relief. Virtual.

Stop Bullying Now!

Monday, September 19, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

Parents gain an understanding of why a child bullies, signs of a child being a victim of a bully, and intervention approaches within the community and school setting. Content is based on the national program, Stop Bullying Now! In person.

Improving Executive Function in Children

Wednesday, September 28, 2022 | 6:00 – 9:00 pm

Many children have difficulty with organizing, planning, goal setting, time management and retaining things in their memory. What looks like defiance and laziness in the child may reflect a deficiency in their executive skills. Parents will learn how to help their child function better in the home setting utilizing common practices used by classroom teachers. In person.



Register for Training

Contact 314.534.9350 ext. 7234 or
email intake.dept@familyforwardmo.org

Visit [familyforwardmo.org/
calendar](https://familyforwardmo.org/calendar) to view training
information online.