



Creating Trauma-Informed Congregations

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Across the country, there is a growing movement to create “trauma-informed” services, organizations and communities. This movement reflects an understanding that psychological trauma and toxic stress are near-universal experiences that can affect every aspect of life, and that everyone has a role to play in addressing the issue.

According to national experts convened by SAMHSA, trauma results from events or circumstances that are experienced by an individual as harmful or life threatening and that have lasting adverse effects on mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being.

While many individuals experience traumatic events without lasting harm, trauma can place a heavy burden on individuals, families and communities. Trauma-informed supports can help.

Being trauma-informed means:

- Realizing how trauma affects people;
- Recognizing the signs;
- Responding by changing practices; and
- Resisting re-traumatization by addressing trauma and toxic stress in the lives of both staff and people served.

Many Americans find comfort and assistance from spiritual leaders and faith communities during times of grief, loss or trauma. In fact, many people turn to [clergy for support](#) before they turn to mental health professionals.

For some, religious beliefs and faith provide a source of wisdom or a narrative that can help re-establish a sense of meaning after a life-shattering event. For others, relationships formed in spiritual community are deeply supportive.

A growing body of research also documents the positive effects of prayer and spiritually-based practices like meditation, contemplation and sacred music.

For example, yoga is known to be an effective treatment for trauma-related problems; meditation and mindfulness training reduce depression and anxiety.

Clearly, faith communities have the potential to be healing.

A congregation that fully understands the impact of trauma and knows how to respond is trauma-informed.

In addition to understanding the impact of stress, a trauma-informed congregation:

- Expects and supports recovery after adversity;
- Has physical, social and psychological resources to help buffer and heal the negative effects of traumatic events; and
- Is prepared to take deliberate, collective action in the face of adversity.

Here are a few ways to make your congregation or community more trauma-informed:

- Become educated about how trauma and toxic stress affect [people](#). You may be surprised at how often trauma underlies seemingly unconnected problems.
- Ask “What happened?” instead of “What’s wrong?” when [talking with a friend](#) in need.
- Give people the chance to [tell their stories](#) in their own time and way. While specialized trauma treatment is sometimes needed, having someone acknowledge what happened is often enough to begin a healing process.
- Encourage and express empathy in your family, congregation and community. Convey a message of nonviolence, love and compassion.
- Ask faith leaders to support the development of a trauma-informed congregation and join the movement.