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COMMUNITY-BASED RESPONSE TO COLLECTIVE TRAUMA

A guide for community responders providing initial psychosocial support in times of crisis

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"We had a lot of trouble with western mental health workers who came here immediately after the genocide and we had to ask some of them to leave. They came and their practice did not involve being outside in the sun where you begin to feel better. There was no music or drumming to get your blood flowing again. There was no sense that everyone had taken the day off so that the entire community could come together to try to lift you up and bring you back to joy. There was no acknowledgement of the depression as something invasive and external that could actually be cast out again. Instead they would take people one at a time into these dingy little rooms and have them sit around for an hour or so and talk about bad things that had happened to them. We had to ask them to leave."

A Rwandan person talking to a western writer, Andrew Solomon, about his experience with western mental health and depression.

Acknowledgements

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Glossary of terms

Community responders
A group of volunteers from the local community who have been given initial training in how to respond to a disaster or an emergency

Depression
A deep sadness and low energy that persists over time and is hard to shake off. At its worst, it leaves someone unable to do the normal activities of their life, even though there may be no physical disability.

Primary trauma
The feelings experienced after a sudden tragic or frightening event.

Signs of trauma include:

- ***Physical symptoms****:* trembling, shaking, a pounding heart, rapid breathing, a choking feeling, stomach tightening/churning, dizziness/faintness, and cold sweats.
- ***Emotional symptoms****:* racing thoughts and excessive feelings of shock, disbelief, fear, sadness, helplessness, guilt, anger, shame and anxiety.

Secondary Trauma
Sometimes experienced by those who are working with or hearing about these events, though the person hearing it may not have directly experienced these events themselves. Community workers who are frequently responding to horrific events experienced by other people, could succumb to secondary trauma. The physical and emotional symptoms may be similar to the signs of primary trauma.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
The long-term impact of unaddressed trauma.

Signs and symptoms of PTSD can include:

- ***Shutting down emotionally*** and being unable to make meaningful connections, remaining agitated and distrustful, denying the occurrence or an event.
- ***At an extreme level, being unable to focus*** on anything long term, to eat, to sleep or to care for themselves.
- ***Can lead to people using drugs or alcohol*** as a way to block out the pain and keep on living.

Regeneration
The ability of nature, people, communities or landscapes to regrow and repair themselves in a way that is healthier and stronger than in the past.

A Regenerative approach
A term used by Re-alliance to describe our approach, focused on supporting growth or repair. This is different in each context, but it is always mindful to avoid creating dependency or giving things that will damage the ability to self-repair.

Resilience
The ability to manage risks over time at individual, household, community and societal levels. Something or someone is resilient when they can return to their original shape.

Settlements
Informal towns, Communities or gatherings of people, often established after displacement.

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- Follow 🔗**external links** in the useful resources boxes to recommended additional materials

Introduction

About Re-Alliance
Re-Alliance promotes a regenerative vision for the humanitarian and development sectors where the health of the environment is improved together with the health of people, understanding that the two are intrinsically linked. We are an international coalition of local organisations who use ecological and nature-based solutions (NBS) in our work. From Permaculture in refugee settlements to eco-building in disaster prone regions, our members show how we can create stability, resilience and abundance, even in times of crisis.

This booklet is part of a series
This booklet forms part of Re-Alliance's Regenerative Camps and Settlements programme. The programme piloted regenerative responses in refugee and IDP settlements. The learnings from the projects informed our research into regenerative responses to disaster and displacement. From this research we have created a series of booklets on community-led regenerative interventions in settlements, aimed at influencing implementing agencies and staff. We have produced longer booklets, like this one, for trainers, and shorter guides for participants to use on a mobile phone.

Introduction – Who this guide is for
This guide is for trainers and community practitioners who may provide a first response to groups affected by crisis or disaster. It introduces the concept of collective trauma, that can be experienced by groups as well as individuals, and the importance of providing emotional support in the immediate and longer term. Trauma, if not properly addressed, can threaten social cohesion in communities and fuel ongoing conflict or unrest.

The guide is informed by the work of Re-Alliance partners who have been piloting approaches to trauma healing in Cameroon with inputs from other practitioners working in difficult contexts. It is designed to help community responders support others facing the emotional distress caused by conflict and displacement. It considers strategies for first aid response and activities to help groups and communities to begin to heal after a crisis. It also identifies signs of more serious conditions where people should be referred on for specialist help, if this is available, from larger support organisations or hospitals.

It contains information that should be included in short training courses for a team of responders and advises that whenever possible this should be planned and delivered in advance.

This guide and the supporting Re-Alliance online course are directed towards people with no former training in psychology and includes simple activities and approaches that can be undertaken with community groups. Wherever possible, such support should be designed and managed by people who share a similar context, culture and experience. Concepts of trauma and psychology are often seen as Western notions, and they may be hardly recognised in some non-western contexts, to the extent that they may not exist as terms in the local language. It is, therefore, essential for anyone planning to provide support in their local community to acknowledge such barriers and find a way to address the issues in a way that makes sense to the people involved. The guide also focuses on a collective, rather than an individualised approach. It recognises that while people respond to trauma differently, when the experience of disaster is collective, community, connection and staying in relationship can be as significant as individual therapeutic responses, which are often unavailable in such contexts.

A Regenerative approach
We define a regenerative approach as one providing the support needed for a system, landscape or community to heal itself. A regenerative approach to conflict and trauma supports the restoration of connections, and a sense of identity, power and agency, all of which can be taken away by painful and unexpected events. Conflict or environmental disasters, which force people to leave their homes, and can cause fatal harm to individuals, leave behind a sense of helplessness in the face of uncontrollable events. As a result, people can lose a sense of who they are, lose family or community members, and lose trust in themselves, in nature and in other people. While trauma manifests itself in different ways, one common result is for people to feel alienated by their grief and separated from everything they know and understand. Restoring this can take weeks, months or years, but responding with some understanding of the impact of trauma, and the conflict and tensions created as a result, can all contribute to their healing and a regeneration of identity, community and trust.

Part 1 Responding to Disaster and Emergency

The Role of Community Responders
Community responders are often first on the scene following a disaster or emergency. They generally bring with them a mixture of skills, sound knowledge of the environment and the terrain and a commitment to help. As a result they are often as effective as trained responders in bringing people to safety and offering physical and emotional first aid to minimise traumatic effects. With some basic understanding of trauma and emergency response, an ability to recognise when professional help is needed, a simple referral system and a few ground rules, they can make a significant difference.

While emotional first aid is not professional clinical support, it can make a huge difference to large numbers of people. People may not need hospital or psychiatric care if they can be well supported in the first phases of disasters. One-to-one therapeutic counselling is often unavailable or seen as alien to people used to dealing with adversity in the community and with the help of others. With some prior knowledge and understanding of trauma and common reactions to it, local community responders can offer practical and emotional help when it is most needed.

Part 1 of this guide provides some pointers to help people respond with speed and care.

Being prepared
As conflict, disaster, and forced displacement occur more and more frequently, communities can prepare by building resilience in their communities and their land as well as having a team who can respond quickly when these occur. Whether a crisis is caused by natural or human forces, getting people to safety and avoiding escalating their distress is a priority. This guide therefore also contains some core principles on how to plan for a more fragile world, and how to respond to an imminent or current event.

Longer Term Trauma Support
Once the immediate disaster is over, community responders can also provide important resources to help people cope with the experience they have faced. Natural disasters or violent human actions are often terrifying. Whether someone witnesses or experiences them directly, they can find themselves feeling powerless and helpless. As a result, people can lose faith in their ability, and in the ability of nature or other people to take care of them. Such feelings can, over time, convert into fear, anger and intense distrust, leaving a person either cut off from others in society and/or reacting violently in unpredictable ways.

Part 2 of this guide therefore contains details of longer term activities that communities have undertaken to help people heal.

Such activities, organised with minimal resources, can provide a safe space to explore difficult feelings with others, maintaining connection and over time, rebuilding trust. But it is important to recognise how far you can help and when additional specialist help may be needed.

Part 3 of this guide contains information on holding a training course to share this information with others in the community .

It also includes details on how to take care of yourself when working with others, and how to support a group of responders you have trained.

Approaching People in Distress
When faced by people in acute distress, the first task is to establish calm and move them to a place of safety. Responding rapidly, assuming gentle but firm control of the situation and quickly ascertaining who else is in the area and in danger can save lives. Calling for additional help as necessary and reassuring people that you are there to support them are all vital first steps.
Find out someone's name as soon as you can, and use this when speaking to them. It will help them focus and feel recognised as they struggle to make sense of what has happened. Don't ask unnecessary questions, focus on what you need to know to keep them and others around them safe.

Key First Responses:
- *I'm (name), I'm here to help you*
- *What's your name?*
- *Are you hurt?*
- *Can you walk?*
- *Are you able to come with me? I'm going to try and get you to safety*
- *Who else is here?*

Once people are out of immediate danger, offer practical support:
- *Find out if people need food, shelter, or are looking for someone rather than focusing on what happened to them*
- *Keep people informed of what you are doing and what you are going to do*
- *If you need to physically touch someone to move them, let them know*
- *If you need to call for help, check for details on what help is needed*
- *If you need to leave for help, say 'I'm going to try and get help,' or 'I'm going to try and find out what happened'.*
- *Don't promise something you will not be able to deliver, such as 'We will find them' or 'it will be OK'.*

Don't press people to talk about what has happened or ask why
- *Respect someone's personal space or need for silence*
- *Offer calm reassurance and simple practical help, listen if someone is ready to speak*
- *Be conscious of the safe place you take people to, and whether there are other people around. While people may want space and privacy, they may not feel comfortable being alone with someone they have just met*
- *In some cultures, women may feel more comfortable and safe if they are supported by women, men by men, and others with those who have a similar gender, sexual or ethnic identity. Have people nearby who speak the same language and can provide additional help as needed.*

Your role as a first responder is to provide practical support, a sense of safety and reassurance, and be around to listen if people want to talk. Your role is not to pressure people to talk or to take away their sense of agency to do things for themselves.

Different reactions to disaster
When faced with a traumatic or life-changing event, people's immediate reactions can range from panic or hysteria, or shock as they struggle to recognise the enormity of the event. While panic and hysteria are obvious external reactions, when in shock someone can initially seem calm or unaffected, at times even smiling or laughing at the strangeness of what has happened.

Trauma is a normal reaction to abnormal events.

It can be caused by:

- Experiencing
- Seeing
- Hearing about

something unexpected, frightening or distressing.

Common initial reactions include:

- Weeping,
- Shaking, severe headaches or sudden pains
- Inability to sleep, heightened awareness or anxiety
- Extreme happiness and relief at being safe, when they had thought their lives might end
- Guilt at having survived while others, particularly children, did not

More serious reactions include:

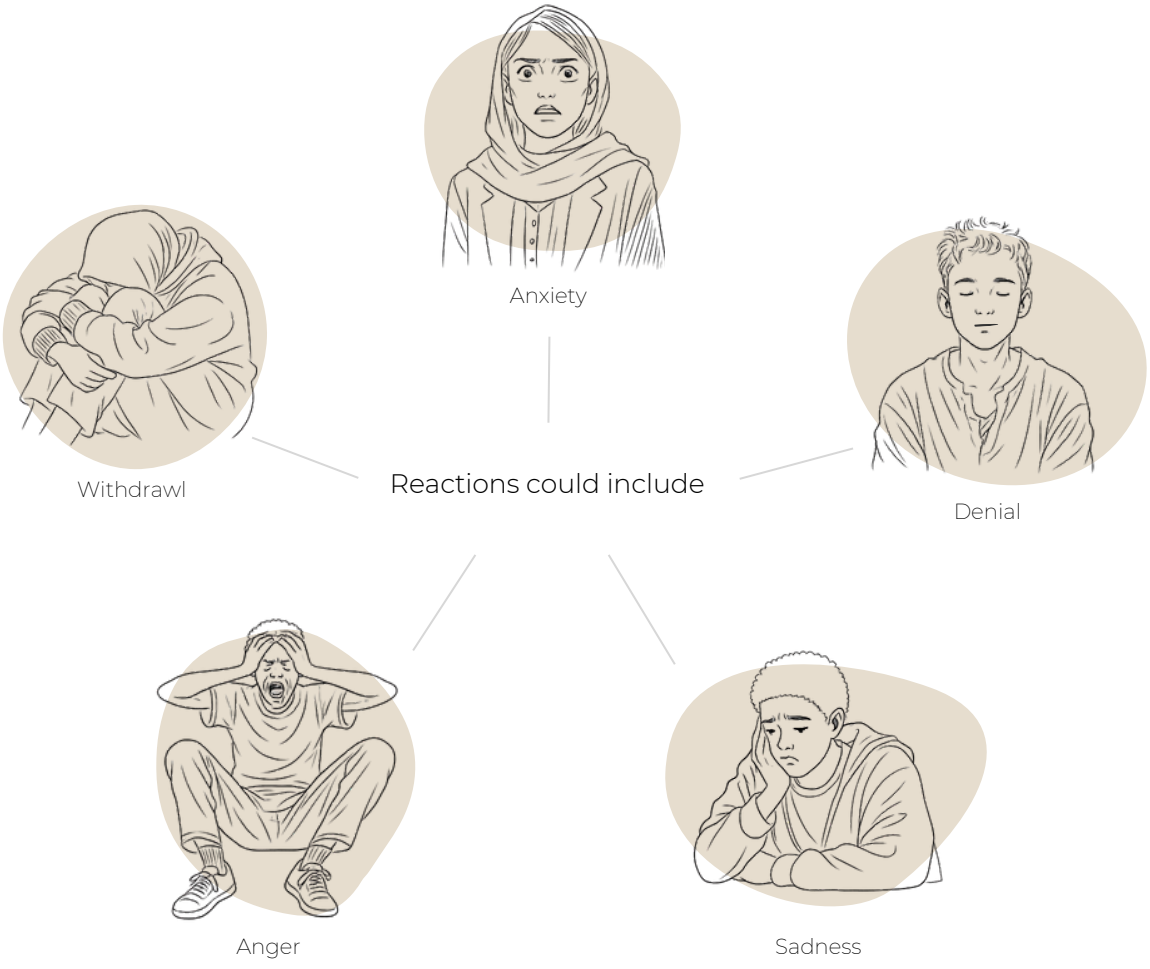
- Violent anger, and the need to hit back at self or others
- Being completely withdrawn, unable to speak or respond
- Losing a sense of who you are, confusion, inability to speak or answer basic questions
- Being confused and disoriented, unable to remember what happened or where you are.

People with more serious initial reactions may need to be carefully supervised in the early stages to avoid further harm to them or others.

Different cultures tend to:

- Express suffering differently
- Deal with past and painful memories differently
- Hold different views on the sources of resilience, and whether these are human or beyond human and linked to the supernatural responses
- See their losses as a collective or individual burden
- Differ in their ability to share emotion or see this as a private affair.

Having people to cry with is valuable. Letting people own their stories can help them to heal.



Assessing what you can and can't do

While community responders can make a valuable difference in the immediate aftermath of a crisis, the key to working effectively is being clear about your limits and being honest about this with the people in your team and those you are supporting.

DON'T

- ***be afraid to take a break if you need one, over exhausting yourself may mean you will not be able to offer help the following day when your support may be even more important***
- ***risk your own life or those around you by pretending you are stronger than you are or have skills you don't have***
- ***promise something you may not be able to deliver or pretend that everything will be ok***

DO

- ***work in a team, assessing who in the team is best able to take on which task***
- ***inform yourself in advance of other services you can refer people to***
- ***make sure you keep your team informed of your actions, so they know where you are, and tell those you are supporting what you are doing, so they know what is happening and what they can expect.***

The Importance of Active Listening

While it is important to act swiftly and decisively, once people are out of immediate danger, they may want to talk through what they have just experienced. While some cultures find it hard to speak about difficult experiences, talking through an event could help someone to come to terms with it, and begin to process it for themselves. This can be a first step to recognising how affected they have been. A community volunteer can contribute a huge amount by being present and able to listen. Active listening involves spending time with someone, and allowing them to tell their story, without too many questions.

- *Show you are listening by making frequent eye contact.*
- *If appropriate, mirror their stance by sitting if they are sitting, leaning forward to listen attentively, or back to allow them space (reflecting their body language).*
- *Nod, or acknowledging what they are saying with small remarks to show you are listening.*
- *Reflect back by summarising what the person has said from time to time, to clarify that you have understood (so you are saying that….).*
- *Acknowledge how frightening or difficult the experience must have been without pretending you understand.*
- *Many cultures would prefer to do this in a group rather than one to one, but exchanging and sharing experiences within a larger group should use many of these behaviours.*

Identifying Specialist Services and Making Referrals

- *Remember that you are part of a team, and can be most effective if you work and collaborate with others.*
- *Assess whether you can or can't deal with a situation.*
- *Be ready to refer people to other services if these exist, and if they can be more effective than your team.*
- *Contact other organisations in advance, familiarise yourself with their services, and share information with other members of your team.*
- *Update information on other services regularly, keep a list of contacts or locations of where they operate somewhere easily visible.*
- *During a crisis, check whether these services are still operating and have capacity, before sending someone there alone.*
- *Prepare* ***a referral form*** *that shares the brief information you have been able to gather about where or how they are hurt, so they can be treated as quickly as possible when they arrive.*
- *Keep a record of who you have met and where you have sent them so you can inform people who are looking for them. But be careful who you share the information with. Find out from someone as you take their details whether there is anyone they may not want you to share these with or that might further endanger their safety.*

Part 2: Healing Trauma and Rebuilding Connection

The impact of trauma on individuals and communities

Unforeseen and overpowering events, whether as a result of natural disaster, war or individual human violence, can leave people feeling helpless in their inability to resist or prevent them from happening. As a result, they can lose trust in themselves and those around them and become fearful that they cannot depend on those people, structures or strategies that have kept them safe in the past. In cases of community conflict, where violence has been carried out by those known to them, they may feel they can no longer trust their own judgement or connect with others. In times of natural disaster, nature can be seen as angry, no longer trustworthy or delivering judgement in return for some wrong they may have done.

Individuals react differently to shared events and people are often surprised by their ability or inability to cope. There are many reasons why some remain resilient in the face of crisis. Their background can influence this, their social connectedness or their physical resilience, or the things that have happened to them or their family in the past. Individuals who are suffering mustn't blame themselves for their reactions when others who have experienced similar things appear able to carry on. Trauma from an earlier experience can be reactivated, whether that trauma was experienced by people themselves or by their ancestors, there is a general belief that this remains in people's blood or bodies and can be reawakened when it recurs. The important thing is not to question why someone feels or reacts as they do and to support them in understanding this as part of a natural process.

Collective trauma, experienced by a community or family, can create painful rifts as people are affected or react differently. How people remember and retell their story can make a huge difference to how they are able to recover from it. Ignoring trauma, or pretending it doesn't exist can have harmful effects on a person and a community's health and wellbeing. If people do not talk about or process trauma, it can reappear in dreams or nightmares or even make someone physically ill.

Similarly, a collective response that focuses on blame and vengeance can keep people feeling as if they are victims that must harm others in response. When someone has witnessed or experienced violence, they may see anyone of the same gender or ethnicity as those who inflicted it, as potentially harmful. Women who have been sexually abused by a man can blame all men, while someone who sees their friends harmed by a different cultural or ethnic group can seek vengeance of all of them. This process will escalate violence in a community and destroy any sense of cohesion. Working through it is a slow process that can take many years. While justice is important it is equally important to avoid adding to any sense of blame and collective vengeance in the early stages of a response.

Sharing stories of painful events can help create strong bonds between people and form a powerful source of strength in the future. Try to support groups in finding this strength and power beyond an initial feeling of helplessness, and to identify the strength they and their broader communities do have. Celebrate this with rituals and telling stories of resilience and survival that move beyond the experience of being a victim.

Individual or Collective Responses

Ways of dealing with individual and collective trauma differ between ethnic and generational groups. Still, it is generally understood that not dealing with traumatic feelings and pretending they don't exist or focusing only on the pain or injustice of an event, contributes significantly to individual unwellness, societal unrest and protracted conflict. Rebuilding a sense of trust and connection and resilience is crucial to the process of healing and being able to move on to live a meaningful life. If people can regain trust in themselves, those close to them and their communities, they may eventually be able to regenerate trust in the wider world and other people. While it is impossible to erase the event, or the painful memories it has left behind, community groups can put in place activities that help people over time to deal with these. A traumatic event can eventually become a story of resilience and forgiveness rather than defeat and destruction.

Working with Traditional Healers and Healing Practices

Shamans and traditional healers or spiritual leaders are often people who understand their community best and have deep experience of working with traumatic encounters. Consulting them or working with them to lead rituals will strengthen existing bonds and connections, evoking the additional support of gods, ancestors and plant medicines. Eastern cultures, particularly those influenced by Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism, approach trauma with a focus on inner peace, balance, and spiritual growth, with practices like meditation and mindfulness and concepts of karma (the law of cause and effect) and dharma (one's duty or path). Native American cultures emphasise balance, spirituality, and connection to nature with purification ceremonies involving sweat lodges believed to cleanse the body and spirit, or drumming and chanting to induce altered states of consciousness and facilitate healing. The African philosophy of Ubuntu, "I am because we are," highlights the interconnectedness of all people and healing as a communal responsibility.

Individually or collectively those impacted by disaster or conflict can respond with:

- *Silence*
- *Denial*
- *Survivor Guilt*
- *Delegation of responsibility to governments or those in control*
- *Long term blame and othering of those held responsible.*
- *Deciding to leave, which can carry additional pain and hardship*

With proper support these responses can be transformed into

- *Stories of resilience and survival*
- *Rituals to celebrate a community's ability to cope and to rebuild*
- *Stronger social and emotional bonds and a more cohesive society*
- *A sense of hope in the future rather than helplessness and despair*

Alienation and the importance of connection

Trauma can cause people to question the things they have trusted in the past, and as a result, become alienated and shut off from those around them and unable to process what has happened. This is made worse if others are reacting differently, and they may not understand the feelings they themselves are experiencing. It can leave people isolated in a very scared and lonely place. Beginning the process of reconnection is vital but can take time. Being with someone and accepting them is an important first step to them accepting themselves. While talking about what has happened can eventually be valuable, this can only happen when people are ready. Making eye contact, sitting together, breathing together, in silence, or doing small or creative tasks together, may be all that is necessary as a first step to begin a process of reconnection.

Individuals and communities are often blown apart by grief and loss. Rebuilding that sense of connection can help put both back together again by giving them the tools and the resilience to carry on living. The exercises and rituals in the next section of this document are some that our partners have designed and shared and found to be useful in the field.

However, when training community responders it is important to emphasise that all of these activities should be voluntary with no one feeling pressured to take part. People will come to them in their own time, and use those they feel ready for or find meaningful.

Useful resource: 🔗 **Psychological First Aid and Trauma Support video**

Reconnecting with self

After the immediate emergency has passed, people who have experienced extreme loss often continue to respond with denial, either by shutting down or refusing to speak about past events. Some cultures see silence as a sign of strength or resilience, others may feel shame that this event has been able to take place in their home area. Some individuals may find themselves surprised at how they reacted in an emergency, that they can't forgive themselves for something they did nor did not do, shaking their trust in themselves and their abilities.

Either way, a refusal to show or acknowledge deep emotion ultimately leaves someone disconnected from themselves. Reconnecting with self is a first step to reconnecting with others and that may mean breaking or challenging a culture of silence. Community led activities that have contributed to this process are described below.

When bringing together a group it is important to get individual agreement to both be present and to act in a way that enables everyone to feel safe and supported. Activities should be held in a safe environment, without outsiders looking in (see Training Logistics section 3), around a fire or in a secluded space. Ground rules (see the paragraph on Ground Rules in Section 3) are useful as a way to introduce the purpose of the sharing, and agree on the behaviour that group members will try to maintain. Mothers with young children will need to bring their children with them, and more information on working with traumatised children can be found here.

Sharing Experiences and Acknowledging that they happened

This is an age-old practice that has been used by many communities and cultures, and involves sharing, in a circle with trusted others, your own experience of the events that have taken place. Sitting in a circle, taking turns in speaking, using a talking stick for those who want to talk, or staying silent until someone speaks are ways to create a space where people can share and support each other's pain. Speaking an experience aloud can involve reliving it, resurfacing that pain and often creating a physical reaction. But it enables the person to reconnect with a part of themselves and their past they have tried to keep hidden. Listening to the experience of others and recognising that others have also suffered can develop a sense of personal acceptance and group solidarity and help people to feel less alone.

Expressive writing and burning paper in the fire

In situations where people may not feel comfortable speaking aloud, giving people time to write down their experience on paper and then burn that paper in the fire, can help them to connect with and then release painful memories. Again, the experience should take place in a safe space and in a closed circle. Give people time to write and to process their thoughts. Be prepared for displays of physical emotion and be ready to support people when they go through this. Reassure people it is a way to get the experience out of their heads and out of their bodies, and while they will never forget it, to burn some of that pain away.

> In this activity, the SACOD team first asked participants to recollect their traumas in a moment of silence. Then, the participants were asked to express their trauma and emotions by writing on paper. Those who could not read or write were asked the same, and these memories were written by proxy. Through writing, the participants were able to explore and challenge any negative thoughts and develop these into more positive and empowering perspectives. Once all participants had finished writing, the paper was burnt to light a fire. In the Northwest regions of Cameroon, fire is culturally significant, playing a central element in traditional gatherings and storytelling. Therefore, gathering around the campfire reconnected the participants with their cultural heritage and provided a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the warmth and light from the campfire became a powerful symbol of hope and resilience.

Soap ritual

Either of the activities outlined above, can be followed by a soap ritual as a further way to wash away pain and leave the true self behind.

Soap can be given as a gift to participants, to continue something that is started in a group setting.

In SACOD's project, soap was used to accompany a ritual of recalling negative experiences and memories that needed washing away. Although soap is not a form of therapy, the participants testified that the ritual was a powerful tool for healing. Soap reminded them of traditional cleansing rituals often performed in the Northwest and Southwest regions when someone experiences loss and pain. Pain is believed to bring negative feelings and dirty the body; thus, using soap relieves the body of dirt and emotional pain.

Reconnecting with nature

The power of nature, and how we collectively experience it can be both a source of strength and fear. Nature demands respect and that we find a way to coexist with it. Many traditional and indigenous cultures find their gods and healers in the natural world.

Rituals to give thanks for coming through disaster, and to request the support of the natural world to survive the coming weeks and months, can help people come to terms with the need to co-exist with the natural world even as it changes or is changed by those within it. Encourage people to spend time alone, or with others in a natural environment and communicate with it, to make their peace. When war, hurricanes, earthquakes, tsunamis, or environmental disasters threaten a bio system, humans may often seek physical and emotional affiliation with other living organisms, seeing themselves as part of this living system. It can trigger an urgent response to restore order, working collectively to enhance their local environment, through community forestry or community gardening, and the recovery of biodiversity and balance. However, in many conflict-affected areas, economic hardship and persecution are macro issues in the minds of IDPs and refugees. The idea of reconnecting with nature may not seem like a priority and can often be introduced indirectly rather than as an aim. For example, it may be possible to hold groups in green areas or mountains, a forest or around a river, so nature provides a backdrop as people focus on things that are a priority to them.

After periods of conflict and violence, the natural world can offer an important source of healing. There is a continuity in the seasons that transcends human suffering, and it offers a way for people to find peace in connection with something bigger than themselves and their immediate context.

Proven Psychological Impacts

Spending time in nature has been scientifically shown to calm different areas of the brain and body with a positive impacting on people's ability to cope. Reconnecting with nature can promote physical and psychological resilience and aid trauma recovery.

However, after a natural or climatic disaster, it is easy to lose trust in that sense of continuity and see the power of nature as something destructive and terrifying. Rebuilding that connection can take time, but evidence suggests that doing so will positively impact trauma healing.

Importance of green space

Green space in people's living environment is generally associated with feelings of social safety, and communities have often sought out green space and connection with other living things after experiencing so much death. Putting space aside for gardens, trees or plants even in a temporary settlement can have a significant positive impact on the environment and the well-being of the people who live there. Whether this is a public park, a community garden, a roof terrace or pots surrounding tents or temporary homes, green spaces have a strong healing effect on individual and collective trauma.

Research has shown how natural systems support human resilience, especially in post-disaster contexts but are often not the first priority in immediate disaster response. Community groups can make an important contribution by bringing people together to restore the natural environment.

Growing a garden or replanting trees

Cultivating a community garden, or replanting trees that have been uprooted or used for firewood, helps people invest in a new future. People will need to eat and to survive beyond temporary soup kitchens and food aid, and quick fruiting and nutritious vegetables, grown at home, are vital when food is in short supply. Community responders can help by identifying the seeds that have survived, finding spaces where the soil is less damaged or polluted, and supporting groups to start planting. Trees will be needed for firewood and shade, vegetables for vitamins and minerals, and bringing a group together can help to heal wounds as well as develop a sense of agency and self-help, to overcome the powerlessness they have recently experienced. Historically, gardening has provided a way for victims of war to restore their mental well-being. Planting in displacement is a gesture of rooting and connecting, if only for a brief period.

Setting up a community or memorial garden

As well as providing food or flowers, a collective or community garden can serve as a memorial for those who have been lost. Celebrating and remembering those who have died is an essential part of coming to terms with trauma, and creating a place to remember people is an act of love. This has an especial value when families do not have graves or places of burial in which to spend time with those who have passed. When trauma and death have been experienced collectively, a collective memorial and a space where the community can come to remember will be important into the future, as well as providing an immediate practical shared activity to involve people during their most difficult times.

Reconnecting with family

Conflict and disaster can tear families and environments apart. When family members respond differently, support different sides of a conflict, or make unexpected decisions, the anger and animosity felt towards previously close family members can be greater than that toward strangers. Families should be a strong source of support, and when something happens to disrupt this, the resulting pain is considerable. An important step towards healing trauma may be reconnecting with family members or coming to terms with their loss.

Supported family meetings

Community responders can play an important role in supporting meetings between family members who no longer feel able to talk directly to each other. If both parties are willing to meet and to speak, having a third person present can add a sense of safety to the meeting, enabling each of the to risk saying things they may not do alone.

Before offering to host a family meeting:

- Meet with each person separately, discuss what happened, and try to understand their perspective. Make sure they are really ready to meet, and don't rush people before they feel able to talk.
- Find out what each person hopes for from the meeting. Ensure they are ready to listen to each other and to tell their side of the story. You may need to hold more than one meeting with each party, before it feels appropriate to bring them together.
- Check in with your feelings:
  a) Are you able to be neutral and support both people rather than siding with one point of view?
  b) Are you able to hold the feelings of each person and keep the meeting safe?
  c)Are you prepared for the anger or pain that may be triggered by a meeting?
  d) Do you need support?

It may be preferable to work in pairs and conduct a joint meeting with two facilitators who have both been involved in the pre-meetings to ensure you and the family members are well supported.

- Re-assure both parties that the meeting will not force them to do anything they do not wish to do, and the nature and outcome of the conversations will be kept confidential.
- Arrange to meet in a safe, neutral space. Have a format or structure for the meeting that allows each family member to speak separately without being interrupted. Summarise what they say, using neutral language where possible, before allowing the second person to speak.
- Acknowledge that not all meetings will be able to repair relationships, but allowing each person to be heard by the other can be an important first step. People may take time to forgive either themselves or each other.
- Remind people that crises and unexpected events create unexpected emotions and lead to behaviours people would not normally engage in during more peaceful times. We are all open to being manipulated by others or to taking actions we regret later.
- Encourage people to speak about events in the first person, with sentences like 'I felt' 'I saw' or 'I experienced' rather than talking about what others did or didn't do.
- Arrange a follow up meeting if this is necessary and both parties remain willing.
- Summarise all agreements you have made as each meeting ends, and outline any agreed next steps.

Working with Traumatised Children

Like adults, children can be significantly affected by difficult or painful events they have seen, heard about or experienced. However, many find it even harder than adults to understand and speak about these. They often blame themselves for them, adding guilt and shame to fear. Involving children in a family discussion can be overwhelming for them, but it is important that their experienced are not ignored. Listening to children, involving them, and believing their stories is the most important form of support you can give.

It is crucial to remove children from dangerous places and find a place that is safe for them. However, there is sometimes a difference between where they feel safe (with their families) and where they are physically and emotionally safe. Removing children from their parents should never be done lightly but in situations of war or physical or emotional danger, it is often unavoidable.

Some of the activities that can support adults, such as a clear routine, rituals, letting people know what is happening, and avoiding the unexpected, are equally important for children. However, unlike adults, children often lack the language to speak about their feelings or to work through them. They may also not understand why they are being taken away from everything familiar to them, which will add to their insecurity. Their feelings are more likely to be expressed in changes in their behaviour over time. This can include sleeplessness, refusal to eat, quick temperedness or withdrawal.

Look out for changes in a child's behaviour. A formerly quiet child may suddenly become angry and aggressive, and a previously sociable child can become distant and withdrawn.

- Don't reprimand a child for changing behaviour; instead, let them know you have observed this and give them a chance to talk about how they are feeling.
- Don't press a child to talk, they may be further upset by retelling or remembering the event.
- Don't insist that children do something or behave in a particular way; instead, whenever possible, provide them with choices so they can take some control over their lives.

Useful resource: 🔗 **Unicef Guide on Psychological First Aid for children, adolescents and families experiencing trauma**

Establish new routines and activities as quickly as possible, and let children know what is happening or will happen when. If they have been removed from their parents or caregivers, their first concern may well be when they will see them again. Reassure them, but don't promise anything you can't be sure will happen as this is likely to undermine their trust.

It can be much easier for a group of children who have collectively experienced a traumatic event to deal with this together in a group activity. Below are some that have been used with different cultures.

Creating safety and stability

The most important thing an untrained worker or supportive adult can do is to help re-establish a sense of safety and stability for children. Don't press them to speak but allow them to talk if they want to. Listen attentively, and take seriously what they are telling you, it will be their reality. Offer reassurance where you can.

Every child is different and may need a different type of support. Some may find it helpful to join in with collective activities, such as sport, drumming or dancing to take themselves out of their memories or flashbacks. Others may find noise, or high activity only more distressing, so introduce activities carefully and give children a choice over whether or not they want to be involved.

Working with young children through play

Some activities that might be helpful include:

- *Making dolls or figures to play with and tell stories*
- *Making a magic wand to imagine 3 wishes*
- *Drawing and talking about their pictures*
- *Making things with sand, clay or mud*
- *Drumming, singing or clapping together*
- *Playing games or sports*
- *Creating a den or a safe place where they have control over what happens*

Some activities allow children to reconnect with their bodies and take time out from thinking about what has happened while others are a way to tell stories. Follow a child's lead on what feels right and don't force them to do or say more than they may feel able to. Keep the environment safe, and offer reassurance until they can begin to regulate difficult feelings.

Connecting with Culture

The term 'Culture' refers to a set of practices and ways of being held by a social group, and the belief systems that underpin these, with practices and beliefs both reinforcing each other and adapting over time. Culture plays an important part in shaping someone's identity and is demonstrated by behaviour as well as by objects , such as icons, ceremonies and rituals. Shared learned behaviour and meanings are passed on from generation to generation to promote survival, adaptation, and adjustment and are often represented externally in artefacts or memorials. All cultures have developed ways of making sense of their world through shared imagery and belief systems, and used these to support resilience in difficult times.

Some indigenous cultures see trauma holistically as an imbalance that affects the individual, community, and environment, and healing as a communal process that integrates spiritual, emotional, physical, and relational elements. Elders and traditional leaders are crucial at such times. Other Eastern cultures respond to trauma with a focus on achieving balance and inner peace. Similarly, many African cultures see trauma as deeply related to spiritual beliefs and practices. Responding with an individualised approach only separates people from their culture, at a time when they should be striving for reconnection.

Traumatic events can, however, sever connection with deep-rooted cultural practices and perceptions of safety, trust, independence, power, esteem, and beliefs about the world. The lack of connection to past and present can similarly prevent any notion of a possible future in ways that are alienating and frightening. A traumatic collective event can give rise to deep questions, such as *'do I really belong to this group or this land if members of my group or elements of my environment are capable of these events?' 'Might I also find myself acting in this way?'*

As communities are continually displaced by conflict, violence, and natural disasters, they become further separated from their culture, which is a source of support and from the familiar things that have sustained them in the past.

At this point, cultural practices, icons and memorials connecting them to culture become more important than ever.

Heritage and culture

Reconnecting with culture often entails cleansing rituals or ceremonies to restore balance with the environmental or spiritual world and bring the social group together again.

Memorials are a crucial part of the healing process, as the event becomes part of cultural heritage and built into stories of its past. Familiar ceremonies and memory events that reflect cultural practices serve as a tangible reminder of the event itself, while providing a space and place to reflect and remember at the same time, enable people to acknowledge that event and to move on. Stories of survival and resurrection are important to the recovery process. New symbols or ceremonies can be created out of existing practices, with memorials constructed to commemorate those who have died.

The Therapeutic Community Model (TC)
This is an approach that uses a group-based, self-help model to treat emotional distress or the effects of wars or another form of victimisation. It involves supporting individuals to be involved in some forms of regenerative activities that aim to address the issues that marginalise them. If someone has been persecuted because of their religion, they may want to be involved in advocacy that mobilises people to promote religious tolerance and freedom. If someone has been sexually abused, they may work with like-minded people (allies) to promote justice for victims of sexual abuse. Their role is one of Community Culture Ambassadors. By focusing on and owning the solutions, there is more chance to succeed in addressing their own trauma. Former victims of violence and genocide in Rwanda have made it their passion to work with the issues that led to the genocide in Rwanda or the DRC. One such worker described it as 'my source of resilience, energy, healing and self-help.' By finding meaningful work associated with issues people have personally suffered enables them to find their own therapeutic community.

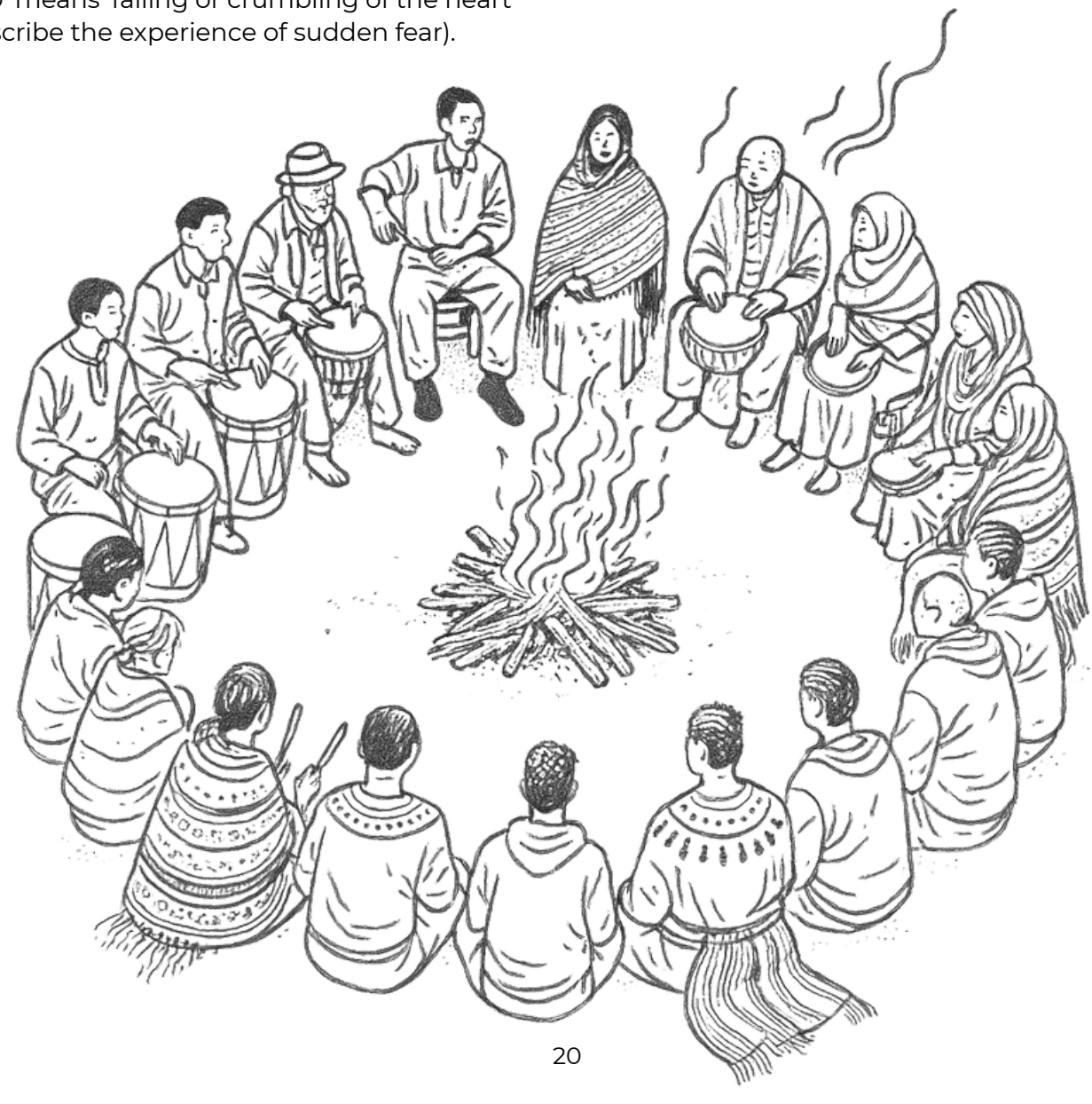
Myths and symbols, and language

Individuals, cultures, and communities need to find a way to explain what has happened to them and their reactions to it. The myths and beliefs regarding the origins of creation and the symbols used for protection vary between cultures according to their beliefs and practices. However, there are similarities in the way that pain is understood and expressed in different languages, which shows a common human experience.

Many cultures talk about how trauma invades their thoughts, in Shona *'kufungisisa'* means 'thinking too much' and *'yeyeesi'* in Kakwa means 'many thoughts' in South Sudan. Other terms relate to the heart, such as *'poil-heart'* meaning 'heavy hearted' from Krio in Sierra Leone, *'qalbi-jab'* which means 'broken heart' in Somalia, *'qalb maaboud'* which means 'squeezed heart' in Arabic (particularly in relation to dysphoria and sadness) and *'houbout el qalb'* means 'falling or crumbling of the heart' (to describe the experience of sudden fear).

Words relating to the head, such as 'amutwe alluhire' which means 'my head is tired' are in Nande in the Democratic Republic of Congo. While some cultures refer to the impact on their whole body, 'jiu sukera gayo' in Bhutanese means 'drying of the body'. Refugees in Nepal use it to indicate a situation of loss and desperation. 'Lashe mn grana,' which means 'my body is heavy,' is from the Kirmanji Kurdish dialect. Each culture develops specific forms and mechanisms for post-traumatic recovery and healing, such as rituals, helper roles, and ceremonies. Trauma and collective recovery are closely linked to a people's cultural history, environment, and a sense of continuity.

Other religions and spiritual beliefs also offer huge support and healing capacities, whether through belief in a single all-seeing god or in many gods. Ensuring people have a safe space in which to conduct religious ceremonies, and can be supported to attend, is a small but vital role for community responders to undertake.



Traditional Healing Practices from the Great Lakes Region

In many African societies, God is thought to be responsible for the unequal distribution of good luck and bad, birth defects, ruin, illness, loss, premature death and accidents, the anger of ancestors who may have withdrawn their favour and protection and that the reason for this needs to be identified and remedied. Many different faiths draw on deep rooted frameworks to explain suffering, victimisation, aggression, violence and loss.

In the African Great Lakes Area Kubandwa, an ancient traditional religious practice, can support people affected by trauma to enter into a peaceful and accepting relationship with a possessing spirit in order to be healed in a ritual that includes Gucekera a process used to drive out unknown spirits (Ventevogel).

In North Uganda, there is a practice of Mato Oput, which means "to drink a bitter potion made from the leaves of the 'oput' tree". It is a traditional ritual-based mechanism for truth, forgiveness and reconciliation among the Acholi people in Northern Uganda. Drinking this bitter juice from the 'Oput' tree means that the two parties in conflict agree on the bitterness of the journey they have both been through. By drinking the liquid of 'oput', they would declare their intention to leave the past behind and promise not to taste said bitterness again. The process also involves paying compensation. This ceremony is considered a peacebuilding restoration of relationships between antagonistic groups affected by either intentional or accidental killings.

In Rwanda, there is the Gacaca, which in Kinyarwanda means "justice on the grass." It is a traditional judicial process in which the Rwandan community tries to judge those who wish to confess or have been accused of genocide crimes. However, the mechanism was used historically to promote the healing and reconciliation of two or more conflicting parties.

In the DRC, the word Barza is known in Swahili as Baraza, meaning 'verandah' or 'elders' gathering place/venue/house'. Such meetings often happen in a traditional house (hut) compound, under a tree, or on the green at the heart of the village. Barza is known as a unique traditional venue for elders' council meetings to address various disputes between family and community and to achieve reconciliation between different tribes. People own and facilitate it in their own cultural environment and context. The Barza house provides a space and authority for parties to offer moral and spiritual guidance relevant to conflict situations. For newcomers in the village, Barza is also where they are welcomed and set to receive the elders' blessing on their stay in the area.

In the DRC, among the communities of Babembe, Bafulero, and Banyamulenge, there is a practice of "lubunga." This is a hut built right in the middle of the community. It serves as a rendezvous point for religious rituals and as a sacred place where people gather to discuss social disputes. The Bashi and Bahavu ethnic groups have a similar place, called 'Ngombe', where they organise the council of elders (Ihano) and any peace process between two or more parties.

Among the Banyamulenge, Bafuliru, Bavira and Babembe people, the Bashi and Bahavu recognise blood pacts (Cihango), which have played a central role in resolving conflict and building peace for many years. In rural areas, among these communities, there is often still a small hut designated for prayers and worship referred to as "Nyumba ya maombi" or "Amaombi". Such a hut is considered sacred, highly respected and honoured.

-Alex Ntung

Reconnecting with community

Conflict, especially violent conflict, creates a situation in which the opposing group is seen to be the enemy, less than human and as such able to be harmed or killed. Stories and narratives are created and retold to reinforce divisions between the in and out-groups, often breaking communities apart as these divisions escalate. Divisions may be ethnic, cultural, age-related or imagined but they serve a purpose in creating a sense of bonding between one group while justifying harmful attitudes or actions towards the other.

Describing the other group as insects or apes, as 'savages' or 'cockroaches' and less-than-human, enables people to either ignore and discount them or undertake acts of terrorism and violence. By distancing themselves from this group people strengthen their allegiance to the other, and with it a sense of belonging or physical protection, gained in return for fighting the opposition.

Even when violence has stopped, the trauma of these divisions will continue to haunt a community and disturb aggressors and victims. For a community to heal and live together, the long process of rebuilding trust, of re-integrating fighters or child soldiers, ways need to be found to rebuild connections. To reverse the destruction of the social and familial networks that are vital for health and well-being, a process of re-humanisation must occur. The African concept of "ubuntu," literally, "I am because you are" from the Xhosa saying: "A person is a person through persons" recognises the importance of a personal recognition of the other for societal healing.

Dehumanising can happen rapidly but re-humanising and reconnecting with the humanity of another can take time. It entails developing a curiosity for those seen as the out group, a real effort to understand their actions and a recognition that they too are human, driven by human needs for safety and belonging. It can take years or even generations for such groups to rebuild trust and a sense of safety and connectivity with each other, but community willingness to reintegrate and reconcile, along with human imagination and curiosity for the other, can all be supported by joint activity and opportunities for sharing.

Community Support Groups

This is an approach which brings people with shared cultural backgrounds together, connects them, and develops a safe environment where they can talk. Over time, it is possible to provide some education about trauma and PTSD so they can make their own decisions about what kind of help would be useful.

Looking at external political factors can help people to see their actions as part of a larger set of structures and forces that lay behind the violence they witnessed. This can help people to understand how they and others may have been coerced into actions they were not fully in control of, and that the trauma they are experiencing is a disease which like malaria, can be treated. Setting up such a support group offers many other opportunities for displaced people to build connection and access advice on coping with a new and fragile environment.

Storytelling

Telling stories, connecting with others and the world through narratives, developing collective meaning, are ancient practices found in may cultures. Storytelling is an important way to make sense of and record the past. Gathering together to tell and listen to stories helps communities come to terms with negative or difficult events and to find a way to pass them on to others as they learn from them.

Studies of how stories are used in different cultures show that a narrative sequence which describes difficult or painful experiences are often told with a positive or happy ending. Collective trauma healing is a process which recognises the social, economic, and political history of an event and the need to restore health and stability. Allowing people to either share what has happened to them or retell myths or older folk talks of how the group has overcome difficulty in the past can generate feelings of survival, solidarity and support.

Storytelling in Cameroon

The SACOD team established a safe and supportive environment at the beginning of each storytelling session by confirming the confidentiality of the participants. Words of connection were a powerful method of bringing people together, as it is a Cameroonian custom to live together as families and communities. The conflict has separated people and so the participants found that sharing words brought a sense of connection. Additionally, narrating traumatic experiences allowed participants to express difficult emotions like fear, anger, and grief in a safe and supportive environment. Common themes in the stories were linked to the loss of a loved one, livelihoods, fear, anger, revenge, frustration, agricultural practices, intimidate partner relationships, and culture. The stories showed that the trauma associated with displacement and violence leaves IDPs feeling voiceless and powerless. After each participant shared a story, the SACOD team facilitated discussions around what was learnt, while other participants shared similar experiences and offered words of comfort. The sessions lasted as long as the participants wanted.

Storytelling as a therapeutic activity required minimal resources and in a participatory group setting, making it an accessible therapy form for IDPs within host communities.

Sports and games

Sports events have often been used to bring together opposing groups and reconnect people by encouraging them to play together in mixed teams, where people work with team members despite their former differences. The physical exercise, the need to cooperate and work together, and the opportunity to focus on the rules of the game and the present rather than the past all contribute to community reintegration and trauma healing, breaking down barriers and creating bridges between opposing groups.

When using sport in reconciliation and reintegration make sure you:

- Understand the conflict and the culture where the conflict takes place
- Base the activities on things people have in common and mutual interest/identity.
- Arrange the activities on the local premises, making use of local resources wherever possible.
- Use Peer educators to ensure openness and interaction rather than teacher-student and a top-down approach.
- Be aware of how services are distributed across conflicting lines. One-sided support might spawn conflict rather than reduce it
- Know how to handle immediate conflicts within the group.
- Know how to handle differences in the groups and how to perceive them as an asset.

Movement in Refuge is a group that works with children and young people to support active games and sports in refugee camps for children that have been traumatised by displacement. They run surf schools in Bangladesh and football trainings in Kenya and are training coaches to deal with trauma while giving young people an outlet in sport.

Sport can help build confidence and trust among diversity, advancing the healing process, encouraging resilience, and giving a sense of normal life.

Sport and games in Cameroon with SACOD

Sports and games as a coping method were used to improve the participant's overall well-being as well as processing trauma. The project participants chose the games, which were handball, football, jumping rope and the local “dodging” “scissor” and “tabala”. "This activity gave people feelings of relief and ease as both male and female participants gathered to play the various games for fun. By focusing on the rules of the games and strategies provided people with a distraction from traumatic memories and worries. Additionally, the participants expressed that being involved in the games gave them a sense of achievement, self-worth, and a safe space for social interaction and communication, reducing their feelings of isolation and encouraging teamwork. People also found that they felt physically better after each sport session. For them, it addressed their mental and emotional well-being while building social connections, which is crucial for rebuilding life after displacement.

Useful resource: 🔗 **The importance of sport in recovery from Trauma**

Art and art therapy

Art therapy can be as simple as providing people with the tools to create images and then using these to tell a story, either on their own on paper or in a group in a public space. Art, painting, or image-making allows people the space and time to re-story an event and find meaning from it while being in the presence of others. Working together on a mural or wall art also serves as collective storytelling and a memorial to what has taken place and those who have been lost.

Music and Dance Therapy

In many cultures, dancing and making music together represents casting out evil and connecting with good, raising the energy and resilience of community members and overcoming difficult memories or negative forces. Most religions use music or chanting in some form, and moving with the music and embodying the feelings it evokes moves people away from destructive thoughts and towards a different somatic or body energy.

Using Music and Dance

SACOD used local music and dance specific to the regions of the participants to bring a sense of comfort and normalcy. Familiar songs such as Shey Iontum's album 'One Family,' Witty Ministrel's 'Proud of Who We Are,' and KRYS M's 'Chacun Sa Chance' provided a connection to people's roots. People found that music and dance helped them to express their emotions and process their trauma together. The armed conflict had deprived them of conducting various traditional ceremonies that were used as a means of connecting and relieving themselves of stressful moments. It was important to use traditional instruments like the gong, which is used to call people together, and this form of coming together was seen as building strength and collaboration. As the Northwest regions of Cameroon have several tribes with distinct musical and dance traditions, the SACOD team emphasised using a variety of songs to create a sense of community even though people came from different towns and villages.

Art Therapy in Cameroon

The community team in Cameroon used art as a therapy to help the people express emotions and process trauma by painting on the walls of community buildings to reconnect with each other and with their cultural symbols. Paintings of drums signified music and dance, reminding people of a time before the conflict, when they used to dance and sing. Drums are also a symbol of relaxation and enjoyment. Drawings of hands together represented prayer and the past, as during the conflict people could not sit together and pray. Peace plants were also included to symbolise the peace of the past. In Cameroon, the peace plant has a large cultural significance. In interpersonal conflicts, when a peace plant is offered, it signifies wanting peace and putting a stop to the conflict, symbolising a need to live in continued peace. Men, women and young people all participated and the project was particularly helpful in creating a space to connect with others who shared similar experiences and trauma. Working together on the paintings fostered a sense of community and belonging, replacing feelings of isolation with shared support.

Community Dialogue sessions

Well facilitated 'sustained dialogue' between different community groups can contribute to transforming conflictual relations and identifying ways for them to cooperate. Sometimes called 'Plenaries', they invite community members or their representatives to come and sit together with the intention of changing conflictual relationships, ending conflict and regenerating community cooperation. It is more structured than a good conversation, but less structure than established mediation and negotiation sessions and has a purpose and a goal of improving community relations.

While community dialogue sessions focus on problem solving, they also pay attention to the human relationships between individuals and groups. A willingness to come together in a community dialogue process is a first step towards reconnecting with each other. Still, they need to be run by a team of facilitators who are not directly a part of the conflict and are skilled in holding large-scale difficult conversations.

Environmental Peacebuilding Meeting, Iraq

In Nineveh, Iraq, dialogue meetings took place in a cordial atmosphere without incident or tensions between participants. Overall, participants demonstrated a strong interest in discussing climate-related and environmental issues and how these affect their communities and their livelihoods. The facilitators played an important role in ensuring that the discussions remained focused, while allowing participants to share their thoughts and lived experiences.

Facilitators were selected who had a deep understanding of the context and the local dynamics of Nineveh, and were able to connect the different views, clarify misunderstandings and identify common ground. During the discussions, there was significant consensus among participants on the importance of working together to address the impacts of climate change. This agreement indicates that climate and environmental issues are a common concern for the different communities and that they can provide common ground for promoting cooperation.

The dialogue participants had a shared understanding of the situation and a shared interest in improving it. Their active engagement was perhaps also linked to the nature of the topic. Climate change and environmental degradation are viewed as pressing issues that require urgent action but are not so sensitive as to give rise to immediate tensions between participants. In this way, climate and environmental issues constituted a fitting entry point for local dialogue. The dialogue sessions were also an occasion for people from different communities to interact with each other. The facilitators observed a noticeable change in interactions as people warmed to each other and engaged in conversation during coffee breaks while building social connections, rebuilding life after displacement.

Some guidelines for facilitating a community meeting

Working with community leaders or elders can encourage people to come and to respect the activities you are doing, and it can be important to seek their permission before beginning. Meeting with them in advance to anticipate painful or difficult issues that might arise and preparing for these in advance to avoid further escalation of conflict.

- Meet with each group in advance, ensuring they are ready to meet, discussing possible outcomes, and assessing their willingness to connect and forgive will help ensure meetings are not arranged until people are ready for them.
- Agreeing ground rules at the start is also helpful, although these will easily be forgotten if anger is triggered.
- Allow each group to speak without interruption before giving the opposing group the right of reply.
- Be ready to hear and hold expressions of anger, but step in to stop direct accusations.
- Summarise areas of agreement when you hear them, but highlight unsubstantiated criticism or blame.
- Give people time out if they need it, either by taking a break or agreeing to meet at a later date, and hold meetings separately with each group before returning together, to ensure they are ready.
- Summarise agreements and next steps at the end of a meeting, and address strategies that groups might return to if these agreements are not kept or if new conflicts arise.
- Thank both groups for coming together and expressing a willingness to move forward, acknowledging how difficult that must have been for each of them.

Part 3: Training Local Community Responders

Understanding Regenerative trauma healing

A regenerative approach goes beyond sustaining to creating the conditions for regrowth in which people, communities, and environments thrive. Based on the permaculture principles of earth care, people care, and fair share, the ubuntu principle of 'I am because you are' and the indigenous people's view of close connections between humans, animals and environments, it recognises that these are all interconnected. For one to thrive, all need to thrive and live in balance with each other.

Supporting a regenerative response means providing the support necessary for a community to heal itself without taking away people's independence and agency. It means identifying what is lacking or has been destroyed and putting in place mechanisms to help this regrow.

It is now recognised that unaddressed collective trauma plays a significant role in ongoing or reoccurring conflict. While individual and community trauma and environmental destruction are among the first impacts of conflict, they also contribute significantly.

Selecting and recruiting community responders

As all environments become more disaster prone, selecting and training a group of community responders in advance is an important part of being prepared. People bring with them different skills and capacities, and assessing these, and allocating people to tasks is part of the selection process. Those with the physical strength to assist with recovery are not always those with the emotional strength to conduct individual or community assessments or deal with longer term emotional distress. In a community where people are known to each other, it may be easier to organise teams who are equipped in different ways.

These should include physical rescue, creation of alternative safe spaces, collection of donated items, food kitchens or family reunification. In a larger or more diverse community, advertising and holding initial meetings, role-play activities, and interviews may be the best way to assess people's capacities and training needs.

See below for some assessment exercises that can be used in a first workshop.

All first responders, whatever their roles, should be trained to recognise trauma and handle other people's fear and anger without inciting their own. Those who are better suited to providing longer-term support will need more in-depth training in psychosocial and facilitation skills.

Working with Collective Trauma

Ensuring physical and emotional safety is crucial when working with people who have experienced trauma, and this often means meeting with and talking to people before they come to a group meeting. Hence, they have some idea what to expect. It is easier for people to feel safe in an environment when they are fully prepared.

- Be clear about the purpose, structure, and expectations of the group or meeting, and check that everyone understands and wants to participate. In advance, let participants know who else will be there and what is likely to happen. Allow them to opt out if they want to and rejoin when they are ready.
- Try to ensure that people are invited to meet in a familiar place. Reassure them that little will be demanded of them and that they can have some control over what happens.
- Choose a place that has some privacy, such as meeting inside a building rather than out in the open.
- Be clear about arrangements for meetings and start and end times.

Looking after yourself, dealing with secondary trauma

Secondary trauma is often experienced by helpers after spending time listening to distressing stories from those they help. Secondary trauma (also called vicarious trauma) is real, and helpers need to protect themselves if they are to continue to be effective. Symptoms are similar to those of primary trauma, and can include headaches, tiredness, inability to sleep, nightmares or bad dreams and feeling unable to concentrate or cope.

Helpers often ignore their own stress, feeling they need to be able to continue to support the worse situation of others who are experiencing crises first hand.

Creating a Basic Referral Form

Below is a basic referral form that will enable you to keep a record of the people who you meet, and where they move on to when they leave you. Record people's details as soon as you are able but check whether there is anyone they would not want you to share these with. This information can be recorded in the notes.

In order to offer effective support make sure:

- you take a break whenever you can
- eat and drink regularly
- talk to colleagues or trusted family members
- don't blame yourself for not being able to do more
- be honest about what you can and can't do and don't be afraid to say no
- celebrate the people you have been able to help without feeling guilty about those you haven't
- Listen to and support your colleagues, as well as those affected by crises.

Useful resource: 🔗 **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) in Humanitarian Crisis Contexts**

Example Referral Form

Name	*Date of Arrival*	*Referred on to*	*Date sent*	*Reason for referral*	*Names of family or friends they wish to contact*	*Notes, threats, potential dangers*

Running Training Groups

The leader or coordinator of a group process or meeting will need to take responsibility initially for ensuring things are well organised and maintaining a sense of safety throughout. They should always treat people as human beings and as equals, recognising their inner strength and resilience. Immediately after a traumatic event, people may welcome someone else taking control, but if they are to reconnect with themselves, reclaiming a voice and recognising they have a choice in how to react and what they do and don't do is part of the recovery process. Agency is crucial in building resilience, preventing groups from defining themselves as victims, so beware of 'over caring' and creating dependency. Allow people full permission to refuse things.

Suggesting and agreeing on ground rules for everyone, the facilitator and participants, can help build a feeling of safety.

Ground rules could include:

- Speaking for yourself and saying I rather than 'we' when voicing needs or relating past events, acknowledging that they may have been experienced differently by different people.
- Being ready to apologise or acknowledge mistakes if you upset someone without meaning to, or use an offensive term.
- Agreeing on a series of words to describe events, groups, people and experiences that everyone finds acceptable.
- Acknowledging that cultural or spiritual practices may be helpful to some and not to others, and establishing an atmosphere of no blame, so that people can choose whether or not to join activities, depending on whether or not they find them meaningful.
- Recognising all forms of expressing emotion as legitimate, as long as others are not directly harmed or challenged by how this is done, and that showing emotion is neither a sign of weakness nor of strength.

Give everyone space to talk, but don't press them to share details or ask about the past. Be honest. Don't for example say 'I know how you feel' or relate stories of your own experiences.

Don't pull rank over them or assume they are fragile, beware of abusing your power by making decisions for others, and allow everyone to speak for themselves.

Building Peer Support within a group

In collective rather than individualised societies, people often prefer to be with others and offer mutual support. While it may take time to build trusting relationships with each other, being with people who have also experienced trauma can help people feel less alone. Over time, the sharing of stories can be healing. Encourage community responders to build a network of peer support for themselves as volunteers and responders, and to look for opportunities to do this with the groups they are helping.

Beware of letting the group fall into

- collective narratives and memories of loss and despair
- collective feelings of victimhood
- collective angst
- language or ways of working that exclude certain groups, creating an 'out group' as a way of bonding the in group

Encourage the strengthening of strong emotional attachments and bonds, recognition of a shared ideology or culture and a commitment to supporting each other to move through difficult feelings

Recognising personal preference, cultural difference and ancestral trauma

Responders should avoid making assumptions about how people want to be treated or what they will find acceptable or appropriate based on previous experiences. Train people to recognise and acknowledge cultural difference and values even within a common collective culture, and don't assume that people from similar identity groups will react in similar ways.

Trauma can be hidden deep within the memories of individuals or communities only to re-emerge in the face of recurring disasters. Many people believe that the trauma of ancestors can be passed down to new generations, but ancestors can also provide valuable resilience and support. Responders should be aware of the existence of past events and their role in triggering new reactions, allowing people time and space to explore these, as well as processing recent events and calling on all available sources of support.

Organising Training

Whether responder training occurs before an event, or immediately following and includes some of those affected, any new crisis may trigger difficult memories. Be prepared to support your trainees, even while training them to support others, and warn people that this may happen.

Organise trainings in a safe and relatively private space. If it needs to be outside, choose a secluded space where you will not be disturbed or interrupted by children or onlookers.

Be clear about the timings of all training meetings and try to stick to these.

Where possible, publicise clearly the time and place of a training session in advance. However, if it is organised suddenly in the early stages of an emergency, prioritise the information that people need to know immediately, and hold follow-up and debrief meetings whenever possible.

Organise people into teams, so they know who to refer to and to look for as soon as they begin to engage.

Select team leaders that you know will command the respect of others, and inspire confidence in those they are trying to help.

Try to log all important information about time, space and contact numbers of different team members and additional services and share this with people either in written format or on mobile phones. The small 🔗 **'First Response to Trauma'** booklet accompanying this guide is available free to download onto mobile phones if they have connectivity and can serve as a useful reminder of key issues.