



LET'S TALK ABOUT IT.®

MENTAL WELLNESS:
HOW TO PROTECT YOURS IN
RECURRING SOCIETAL TRAUMA

ASCEND STRATEGIC
COMMUNICATIONS

AN ASCEND GUIDE



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FOREWORD

The start of 2025 was a defining moment for me as it was for Ascend Strategic Communications, the consulting firm I founded six years ago. Sweeping changes by the new administration impacted our work and personal lives in ways we've not seen or felt for some time. Families, friends, colleagues, and neighbors are at odds as we grapple with our own ideologies, with little desire to listen and find common ground and a path forward. We seem to have forgotten our collective, shared trauma over the last eight years: a world divided politically, a pandemic that killed an estimated 6.8 million people globally (as of May 2, 2023) and kept most of us from gathering—a need so vital to our human existence, social unrest, wars, and climate disasters; all of which we're reminded of minute-by-minute on our devices. We've been coming undone for quite some time now. I have felt the despair of the times we're facing as a nation and quite frankly, globally. And as a mom, I'm deeply concerned for the future we're handing over to our children. I knew that the issues our society is facing are far too great for any one person to tackle alone. So, I began to consider the small ways I could make a difference in my community. Any effort toward making a difference requires physical and mental fortitude to remain steadfast in continuing the necessary work of creating a better world. This guide, in collaboration with Raven Gibbs, MS, LCMHCA, NCC, is our way of helping those who are feeling challenged at this time, to keep going.

Be well.

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THE EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE PAST EIGHT YEARS

Over the past eight years, societal trauma—fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, racial injustice, political division, and climate change disasters—has profoundly affected our mental health, social interactions, and economic stability. This has resulted in widespread anxiety, depression, heightened social divisions, and a growing distrust in institutions, particularly among vulnerable populations.

According to the American Psychological Association, “the national public health emergency around COVID-19 officially ended on May 11, 2023, and while the return to “normal” has been celebrated by many, results from the most recent Stress in America™ survey paint a different picture. Psychologists with APA say a superficial characterization of day-to-day life being more normal is obscuring the posttraumatic effects that have altered our mental and physical health.

When reviewing this year’s survey data, APA psychologists widely agreed there is evidence that our society is experiencing the psychological impacts of collective trauma. “The COVID-19 pandemic created a collective experience among Americans. While the early-pandemic lockdowns may seem like the distant past, the aftermath remains,” said Arthur C. Evans Jr., PhD, APA’s chief executive officer.

Further, widespread trauma has not been limited to the pandemic. Global conflict, racism and racial injustice, inflation, and climate-related disasters are all weighing on the collective consciousness of Americans.

Stress in America 2023: A Nation Recovering from Collective Trauma examines the lasting psychological impacts of this combination of era-defining crises. An inspection of pre- and post-pandemic mental and physical health reveals signs of collective trauma among all age cohorts. “We cannot ignore the fact that we have been significantly changed by the loss of more than one million Americans, as well as the shift in our workplaces, school systems, and culture at large. To move toward posttraumatic growth, we must first identify and understand the psychological wounds that remain,” said Evans.

UNDERSTANDING AND BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS TO MENTAL WELLNESS

It is important to note that current research is specific to mental illness, which is a clinical diagnosis by a licensed professional. Mental wellness—the focus of this guide, is about recognizing feelings of overwhelm, hopelessness, or agitation connected to one’s state of mind, and assessing whether to seek professional help. Nonetheless, it is possible that the barriers to seeking help on how to cope, mirror those related to the stigmas of mental illness that prevent timely recognition and treatment.

Despite growing awareness, several barriers still prevent individuals from seeking help and maintaining mental wellness. Stigma varies across cultures and is influenced by distinct societal norms, values, and beliefs. It can lead to denial, delayed diagnosis and treatment, reduced quality of life, and social

Types of Stigmas

	Public	Self	Structural
Stereotypes and Prejudices	Involves negative attitudes and beliefs that the public holds toward people with mental health conditions.	When individuals internalize public stereotypes, experiencing feelings of shame and diminished self-worth	Systemic policies and practices within institutions that reduce access to mental health care and resources, including disparities in healthcare coverage and discriminatory laws.
Discrimination	This can lead to discrimination, such as reluctance to hire, rent to, or provide care for individuals with mental illness.	These thoughts may lead to lowered self-esteem and reluctance to seek help.	Leads to intended and unintended loss of opportunity and healthier communities

Source: Adapted from Corrigan, et al., 2014.

exclusion and discrimination, particularly when it intersects with other forms of stigma, such as gender, race, and socio-economic status, which can lead to further marginalization of already vulnerable populations.

enduring effects of historical and systemic oppression. Generational trauma, compounded by present-day inequities in healthcare, employment, and education, can contribute to mental distress. Culturally competent care and community-driven initiatives can offer crucial support.

ACCESSIBILITY CHALLENGES AND WHO GETS LEFT BEHIND

Access to mental health resources is not evenly distributed across populations. Low-income communities, rural areas, and minority groups frequently face obstacles such as lack of nearby services, financial constraints, and language barriers. Bridging these gaps requires policy changes, increased funding, and innovative solutions like telehealth and mobile services. Some specific community needs include:

People of color - navigating generational trauma and structural inequities: Communities of color often grapple with the

Immigrants - balancing cultural identity and assimilation stressors: Immigrants frequently experience a dual challenge: maintaining their cultural identity while adapting to new societal norms. The stress of assimilation, language barriers, and fear of discrimination can lead to mental health struggles. Providing multilingual resources, cultural competency training for providers, and community support groups can ease this transition.

Marginalized groups (e.g., women, LGBTQ+ individuals) - overcoming systemic biases:

Marginalized populations often face unique mental health challenges due to systemic discrimination, social exclusion, and violence. Women may encounter gender-based biases, LGBTQ+ individuals might confront prejudice and family rejection. Tailored mental health services, advocacy efforts, and safe spaces are essential to support these communities.

HEALING OUR WOUNDS IN COMMUNITY

Communal Healing

Though there are cultural differences in how various ethnic groups approach mental wellness, we can all agree that the goal is wellness, in whatever shape that takes. The importance of community, connection, and ceremony in the support of mental health has been recognized for thousands of years. In many cultures around the world, this is still the orientation toward healing. Ritual and ceremony are typically embedded into social structures, aimed at restoring harmony within the individual, the collective community, and ancestors.

Community healing might not only consider those within a close-knit social sphere, such as family (whatever that definition means to a person), but also connection to the earth and nonhuman beings in nature. The current model of Western medicine often works through an individualistic lens (e.g., the concept of “personalized medicine”). In America’s independence-driven society, it may be difficult to grasp the concept of incorporating community into what might be considered someone’s private affairs. Yet trusted companions who are invested in each other’s wellness can bring both validation and new perspectives to each person’s struggles. Sharing in communal vulnerability and care can deepen a sense of intimacy and meaning in this life.

Adapted, culturally relevant rituals or ceremonies might provide structure for group-directed healing to occur.

The mental state of individuals within a community can significantly impact the overall well-being of that community and therefore requires collective efforts to address and support, rather than solely focusing on individual treatment alone. The two must work together.

PLAN OF ACTION - BUILDING INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE: EVERYDAY PRACTICES FOR SUPPORTING MENTAL WELLNESS

Self-care is essential for maintaining mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

There are some practical, no-cost, accessible steps anyone can take to build resilience and begin their journey to mental wellness. Building resilience involves cultivating habits and mindsets that foster emotional strength and adaptability. Here are some helpful tips and recommendations to consider:

PHYSICAL SELF-CARE:

- Exercise for at least 150 minutes per week (CDC recommendation). taking walks or strolls (or just sitting) outside in your neighborhood or a local park has been proven to boost one's mood. Plus, it adds to daily exercise, which is good for the body and mind
- Get 7-9 hours of sleep per night (American Academy of Sleep Medicine)
- Stay hydrated—drink at least 8 cups (64 oz) of water daily
- Eat a balanced diet with protein, fiber, and healthy fats, whenever possible
- Stretch or do yoga for 10-15 minutes daily to reduce stress

- Research shows that regular exercise reduces stress by 40% and improves focus.
- A study from the National Sleep Foundation found that individuals who sleep at least 7 hours perform better.

MENTAL & EMOTIONAL SELF-CARE:

- Limit your news intake—finding trusted sources of information and limiting your exposure to negative or concerning news is crucial to preventing overwhelm
- Find everyday joy and beauty—deciding to find joy and beauty in your surroundings (nature, flowers, trees, plants, bird watching) will help you stay in the present
- Journal daily to track emotions and thoughts—writing down your thoughts or simply keeping a list of things you're grateful for can positively shift your perspective
- Practice 5-10 minutes of mindfulness or meditation
- Remember to breathe—when feeling stressed to help restore calm
- Set weekly goals to stay organized and reduce anxiety
- Learn to say no and set healthy boundaries
- Seek therapy if needed

- Journaling for just 15 minutes a day can help reduce anxiety and increase self-awareness (APA).
- A 5-minute daily gratitude practice improves mental resilience (Harvard Medical School).

SOCIAL SELF-CARE:

- Lean on your support system—having a small group of trusted friends and family to access when you don't feel your best can help hold you up during difficult times. This will encourage open conversations about mental wellness within social circles by modeling vulnerability and creating safe spaces for discussions

- Find a cause or two—volunteering or participating in your community with organizations that align with your values, particularly during challenging times, can help you feel engaged, connected, and supported
- Establish or expand your peer support network—having support groups in workplaces, schools, and social organizations to facilitate ongoing conversations about mental wellness, can be helpful when you don't have quick access to your closest confidants
- Schedule weekly check-ins with friends or family
- Join a club or organization for connection
- Spend at least 1 hour per week in meaningful social interactions
- Have a “tech-free” meal with friends to foster deep conversations

- Strong social connections reduce stress by 30% and improve happiness levels (Harvard Study of Adult Development).

SPIRITUAL & MINDFULNESS SELF-CARE:

- Start the day with prayer, devotional reading, or meditation
- Spend time in nature at least once a week
- Create a vision board for motivation and clarity
- Listen to uplifting music or podcasts

- Spending time in nature for just 20 minutes improves mood and reduces stress hormones (Cornell University).

ACADEMIC & CAREER SELF-CARE:

- Use a planner to stay organized and prevent last-minute stress
- Break large tasks down into smaller tasks to reduce overwhelm
- Take breaks every 45-60 minutes when studying (Pomodoro Technique)
- Network with mentors for career growth

- Individuals who follow the Pomodoro Technique (work in 25- to 50-minute focused bursts) increase productivity by 25%.

FINANCIAL SELF-CARE:

- Create and stick to a monthly budget
- Avoid impulse spending—use the “24-hour rule” before big purchases
- Track expenses to identify where money is going
- Set up a savings goal (even \$5-\$10 a week can add up)

- Budgeting and financial literacy can reduce anxiety (National College Health Assessment).

HOW TO STAY CONSISTENT WITH SELF-CARE:

- Schedule self-care into your planner like a meeting, class, or assignment
- Use habit stacking (e.g., drink water after brushing your teeth)
- Start small—choose one or two practices at a time and build from there
- Find accountability partners (friends, therapists, or local and online communities)

Consistently engaging in these or similar wellness practices can help build individual resilience that leads to thriving communities. When individuals prioritize their mental well-being, they are better equipped to navigate life's challenges, support others, and contribute positively to their environments. Over time, these small, intentional actions can foster a culture of care, connection, and mutual support. As more people commit to their own wellness journeys, the ripple effect strengthens community bonds and creates a foundation where everyone has the opportunity to **flourish**.

References

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Looking to create similar resources or advocate for mental wellness in your community or organization?
Contact us to learn how we can help you build impactful communications strategies and solutions.

SHARE THIS, USE THIS.
CONTINUE THE CONVERSATION.

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