

Guide for “Remembrance Gathering” to Share Experiences, Reactions, Emotions Following Community Trauma

This is a guide for organizing a session or occasion for members of a community to share their experiences following a community trauma. It is based on a model developed by a team* in the Gillings School of Global Public Health in response to the fatal shooting of a faculty member and associated 3-hour shelter-in-place lockdown on August 28, 2023. The agenda from that event is attached.

The guide is a loose one. Those adapting it should feel free to adapt it according to their knowledge of their community and the nature of the shared trauma and associated harms to varied members of the community.

Shared Trauma: This can be a bomb threat, shooting, threatened shooting, suicide or other mental health tragedy, etc. In a sense, a shared trauma is defined by the effect on the community – widespread distress, anxiety, and/or fear – not by the nature of the event. If an appreciable number of people are feeling traumatized, it’s a shared trauma.

General Rationale: The sharing is based on the observation that, following many traumas, it is helpful for those affected to share their feelings with others who have experienced the events. To be effective, people need to feel free to voice whatever feelings they may be having, including great sadness or depression, fear, anxiety, intrusions (trouble sleeping, concentrating), along with anger. Perhaps as effective as the sharing itself is the feeling that one has the *opportunity to share* and the sense of “I am not alone” in hearing of others’ experiences.

Strategies: The sharing should be informally organized and with the focus on the sharings of those participating, not on the framings or presentations of leaders. In later days, analysis and action planning will be important, but the sharing is for the relatively immediate period when people just need to be heard and to hear others. This leads to some general features:

1. Simple agenda with brief introduction of why we are here and expectations for what may be shared in the session.
2. Facilitators should be respected members of the community (e.g., teachers respected by and viewed as approachable by students) but probably not “authority figures” (e.g., deans, department chairs, supervisors, etc.) in order to reinforce tone that all comments are welcome.

Leveling is an important process objective.

* Thanks to Elizabeth French and Lateesha Watkins who organized the session with extensive help with, in alphabetical order, Matthew Chamberlin, Edwin Fisher, Yasemin Garber, Stephanie Hoover, Laura Linnan, Suzanne Maman, Nia Mariso, O.J. McGhee, Nancy Messonnier, Kim Ramsey-White, Gretchen Senez, Jeffrey Simms, Charletta Sims Evans, Kristine Thorne, Ye Tun, Lisa Warren, Brent Wishart.

3. Facilitators need not be trained counselors – critical is that they be thoughtful, wise, compassionate people.
4. Facilitators need to convey comfort with the session and its purpose so that participants feel someone will help keep things from getting frightening or “off the rails”
5. Instead of welcome or introductory comments that may be received as suggesting a correct way to view or respond to events, the office supervisor, department chair, dean, or other leader should be invited to offer closing reflections. These should focus on conveying that they have heard what has been shared rather than any response to it. The time for responses and planning actions is later.
6. Acceptance that anger or criticisms of the organization’s or leadership’s actions may emerge. Those leading the event and those in authority roles need to be prepared for this and for remaining non-defensive in response.
7. Facilitators may need to redirect gently and with empathy comments that become extended criticisms. The problem is not the criticisms *per se* but the potential of harsh criticisms to cut off sharing of other reactions. Perhaps something like:
“I recognize how important those feelings are and that they are important for all of us to share and hear. It will be important for our leaders to hear them and this session can help make that happen. But I want to make sure that we are keeping room for other feelings as well just now.”
8. Similarly, if individuals voice very strong feelings of anxiety or despondency or anger, the facilitator may suggest that it would be helpful for them to talk individually with one of the facilitating team who could offer to go outside the room to continue the conversation. Make clear, purpose is to provide support, not excise. May also invite friends or others attending with the individual to join them.
9. Other members of the organizing group may also recognize individuals who appear especially upset and approach them with tissues, soft words, and perhaps a hand on the shoulder. In several instances, they helped them move to another room. This proved to be a gentle way of responding to participants’ emotions, perhaps at times preferable to or an alternative to the facilitator addressing them directly.
10. The organizers may want to provide for and announce that a recognized counselor or respected member of the community will be available during the session in a nearby room for anyone who want to meet with them during the session and immediately after.

Remembrance Gathering

UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health

August 30, 2023

Ongoing

- **Refreshments:**
 - o Fruit tray, veggie tray, deli sandwiches, & beverages
- **Whiteboard:** prompt listed on board, attendees to write response on sticky notes & place them on the board to allow privacy for responses
 - o “How have you felt over the last 24 hours?”
- **Rotating Projector Display**
 - o Quotes
 - o Resources
 - o Coping strategies

Facilitators:

- Facilitator: Jeffrey & Suzanne
- Additional: someone to answer questions regarding emergency management

Flexible Event Program

- Attendee Arrival
 - o Refreshments, whiteboard, brief group discussions
- Acknowledgement of Circumstances: Facilitators (divide up topics, below)
 - o Thank you all for coming together today. Before we begin our discussions, I want to acknowledge the heavy hearts we all carry following the recent tragedy that has deeply affected our community. Our thoughts are with the victim, their family, and all those who have been touched by this devastating incident. In times like these, it's essential that we come together as a community to support one another.
 - o Acknowledgement of tragedies beyond UNC
 - Boston parade shooting
 - Jacksonville shooting (racially motivated)
 - Hurricane
 - o Today, this meeting is a brave space where we can openly share our thoughts, feelings, and concerns. I want you all to know that your emotions are valid, and it's okay to express them. Your pain is real, and we stand united with you.
 - o In the face of such challenges, it's important to remember that support is available. There are mental health resources, counseling services, and hotlines that can provide assistance to those who need it. We will ensure that these resources are easily accessible to everyone affected.
 - o For many of us, a wonderful source of comfort is to reach out to our friends, colleagues, peers, or family to share our feelings, listen to theirs, and welcome the support we share.

- We've witnessed the strength of our community in times of crisis before, and I have no doubt that we will rally together once again. There are individuals, organizations, and efforts dedicated to helping us heal and to prevent similar incidents in the future. As we move forward, we will honor the memory of those we have lost by making our community a safer and more compassionate place.
- I encourage you all to share your thoughts and feelings, if you're comfortable doing so. But please remember that sharing is entirely optional, and we respect your choices.
- Thank you all for being here today. Let's honor the memory of those affected by moving forward with compassion, understanding, and determination.
- Embedded Counselor Intro to counselor and their availability during the session
- Moment of Silence -- Facilitator
 - "Before we begin, let us pause for a moment of silence to reflect, meditate, pray or engage in other silent activity"
- Discussion/Community Portion
 - Guiding question: "How are you feeling in the aftermath of the recent events, and what questions or thoughts do you have that you'd like to discuss together?"
- Dean Introduction: Facilitator
- Dean Acknowledgements
- Concludes with Moment of Silence: Facilitator
 - Appreciation: Facilitators thank those who have helped
 - Some staff/faculty to stay behind