

POST-CRISIS LEADERSHIP GUIDE

A survivor-informed resource for leaders supporting people and communities after crises and disruptive events.

It's okay to not be okay.

Disruption and crisis unsettle people in ways that influence their behavior, ability to make decisions, and how they connect and interact with others. For many, this can continue long after the crisis is resolved.

Leaders often sense that people in their organization or community are struggling, but may not know where to begin or how to offer support.

This guide is a starting point — meant to orient leaders and systems in the aftermath of crisis, not solve everything nor provide clinical care.

This information reflects the lived experience of a crisis and provides practical steps to help restore stability across teams and communities. Use it in a way that supports your own capacity and your sense of direction.

This material applies to leaders in organizations, municipalities, and community roles.

In this guide

- Understanding invisible impact after disruption
- Why acknowledgment matters
- How crises affects groups and communities
- Stabilizing actions
- Common missteps to avoid
- Resources and additional support

WHAT PEOPLE EXPERIENCE AFTER DISRUPTION

Common human responses after crises or disruptions

- Difficulty concentrating
- Emotional numbness, fog, or confusion
- Irritability or heightened sensitivity
- Withdrawal or reduced communication
- Temporary bursts of intense productivity
- Trouble making decisions
- Delayed emotional reactions
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Guilt



These are normal responses to an abnormal event – one that threatens life or safety or leaves someone feeling overwhelmed, even if it does not involve physical injury or harm. Our brains work to protect us, and it takes time to return to normal functioning.

Some people heal relatively quickly, in days or weeks, while for others it may take months or years. Some may initially feel okay or even ignore how the event is affecting them, only to experience difficulty coping over time.

People may experience emotional and psychological impacts even if they were not present at the event.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

After a crisis, people may experience emotional or mental health challenges, whether or not they were physically injured or experienced a direct loss. Acknowledging this and the range of experiences matters.

- Publicly and openly recognizing what people experienced helps them feel seen and understood
- Acknowledgement builds trust and helps reduce the isolation many can feel
- People look for cues from leaders to understand what is happening and what comes next
- Silence or quickly moving on without addressing the crisis can increase uncertainty
- Leaders set the tone for how openly people can manage their emotions and experiences in the aftermath

Acknowledging that a person, group, or community is experiencing pain after a crisis can make a meaningful difference, and does not require long messages or personal disclosures. Leaders can speak plainly and openly about what happened, talk about the varied responses people have, and offer consistency.

Everyone is resilient to a certain degree. While some benefit from formal mental health care, many recover through connection, conversation, and validation that their experience matters.

CHECKLIST

- Recognize that **reactions differ** across individuals and timelines.
- Repeat key messages** so people can absorb information at their own pace.
- Use calm, plain language.** It is harder for people to hear and remember information when dealing with strong emotions.
- Notice changes** in someone's level of participation or tone.
- Avoid minimizing** the experience or comparing someone's pain to anyone else's.
- Offer optional, low-key **opportunities for people to connect and share** their experiences.

HOW DISRUPTION AFFECTS GROUPS AND COMMUNITIES

Fragmented communication Information moves unevenly. People interpret tone differently, and strong emotions make it harder to hear and remember information – even when someone is specifically seeking that info.

Uneven recovery timelines Some people resume daily life quickly. Others take longer. Most move back and forth between functioning well and feeling unsettled. This can impact how they show up in their lives, work, and community.

Tension or withdrawal Groups may show more conflict or more silence, and have trouble communicating, depending on how the individuals express and deal with stress.

Erosion of trust After a crisis, people often scrutinize leadership decisions more closely. Even neutral actions may be seen through a lens of uncertainty and fear.

Reduced problem-solving capacity People often struggle with creativity, planning, and long-range thinking until they regain their emotional footing.

Community Note

Municipal leaders play a role in the community's well-being. While large-scale distress is often tracked through lagging indicators like public safety reports, public health data, or economic measures, those metrics rarely reveal the emotional impact of a crisis. Systems are typically not designed or resourced to detect community-level strain in real time.

Many people hesitate to seek support from official channels. This may reflect past experiences, uncertainty about what help is available, or limited trust in authority. As a result, the emotional impact remains hidden, even when the need is significant.

This makes acknowledgment and consistent communication essential in the weeks, months, and years that follow the crisis.

How leaders respond affects how people relate to the community long after the event, including influencing people's level of trust and whether individuals feel supported or alone as they recover.

STABILITY

Disruption and crisis can threaten a person's sense of safety or their identity. One key job for leaders after a crisis is to reduce uncertainty as much as possible.

In the early period after a crisis, people are often overwhelmed with emotion and, depending on the crisis, may be engaged in rebuilding or other recovery activities. That makes it harder to pay attention, to remember things, or to make decisions.

What works best is simple, consistent structure – clear expectations, predictable communication, and a manageable pace. This enables people to function without being overwhelmed.



Watch a [brief video](#) message about the aftermath of a crisis.

What leaders say

What people hear

We need to stay focused and move forward.



My experience is inconvenient right now.

At least no one was physically hurt.



Emotional impact doesn't count.

This will make us stronger.



I'm expected to recover on a timeline.

Let's not dwell on what happened



Talking about this isn't welcome.

We've shared everything we know so far.



Don't ask questions.

WHAT TO AVOID

Common missteps

- Minimizing the disruption
- Rushing to get back to what someone thinks of as normal
- Expecting quick emotional adjustment
- Expecting others to react with the same level of emotion that we did
- Interpreting silence as stability
- Pressuring people to be positive
- Telling someone that their experience doesn't count

Many of these actions come from pressure, urgency, a desire to help quickly, or a misunderstanding about what is happening. They do not necessarily indicate a lack of caring.

Yet actions like these can unintentionally signal that emotional responses are not welcome. And can add to people feeling disconnected, unsupported, and invisible.

Pause and ask yourself:

- What pressure am I responding to right now?
- What assumptions am I making about readiness or capacity?
- What does acknowledgment look like in this moment, even if we don't have all the answers?

- Who might feel overlooked by our response?
- Who has not had a chance to be heard yet?

- How clear is this message for someone under stress?
- How might this action affect people differently depending on their role or proximity to the event?

- When is the right time for this action or message?

RESOURCES

Crisis mental health support and post-disaster guidance.

Tips for Survivors of a Disaster or Other Traumatic Event: Managing Stress, *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)*

- Tips for preventing and managing stress when dealing with the effects of trauma, mass violence, or terrorism. It lists tips for relieving stress and seeking professional help.

Tips for Survivors: Coping with Grief After Community Violence, *SAMHSA*

- For individuals impacted by gun violence, including information about the signs of grief and anger, as well as how to cope with grief. It includes tips for helping children.

Coping with Traumatic Stress Reactions, *US VA, National Center for PTSD*

- Taking direct action to cope with your stress reactions may create a sense of power. Learn how you can use active coping after trauma and for PTSD symptoms.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call or text 988

- Free and confidential support for people in distress, 24/7.

National Helpline, *SAMHSA*: 800-662-HELP (4357)

- Treatment referral and information for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders. In Spanish and English, 24/7

Disaster Distress Helpline, *SAMHSA*: 800-985-5990

- Multilingual support for people experiencing emotional distress related to natural or human-caused disasters. Deaf and hard-of-hearing callers: Text or call using your preferred Relay provider. 24/7

Reflection for leaders

It is normal to be uncertain about what you are seeing in your team or community.

Disruption and crisis introduce emotional complexity. You are also experiencing your own feelings about the event, in addition to being in a leadership role.

These resources provide pathways for getting support – for yourself, your team, and your community.

BEFORE MOVING FORWARD

Leadership during crisis and disruption demands steadiness in uncertain conditions. People look to leaders for direction even when leaders feel unsure themselves.

There is no single timeline for recovery. This work requires attention, patience, and a clear understanding that individuals respond differently and on different timelines.

This work is demanding. Missteps will happen. What matters is that you notice and acknowledge them, adjust, and continue with care.

This guide offers you a foundation as you navigate these difficult times. Return to it when you need perspective or direction.

Leadership support beyond this guide



Confidential guidance for leaders who need structured space to think through complex dynamics, staffing challenges, or community concerns.

Learn more: manya@manyachylinski.com

HIGH STAKES LEADERSHIP SUPPORT