Compound collective trauma: Four ways ministry leaders can help

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Lately, it seems I never can get enough sleep. I find myself with less patience. A task that used to take me an hour now takes me three hours. Any of this sound familiar? I guess it probably does.

We are in the midst of "compound collective trauma." Collective trauma is described as a traumatic experience that affects and involves entire groups of people, communities or societies, such as a hurricane or war.

In a previous article, I discussed the positive and negative effects of the collective trauma of Hurricane Harvey. That is just one example of a collective trauma that effects a specific community or geographical area.

The whole world is a geographical area, right now, experiencing the collective trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. While various countries are experiencing it differently, everyone is simultaneously in the midst of some aspect of the pandemic, and we all are experiencing the trauma throughout our specific communities.

The experience of compound collective trauma

Multiple collective traumas happening at one time is considered a compound collective trauma.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the obvious collective trauma we are

experiencing. Not only are we losing our family and friends at an alarming rate—more than 535,000 Americans dead at time of publication—but we also feel the threat of getting sick at all times, while also being physically separated from loved ones. Individuals also may be experiencing this specific collective trauma differently depending on age, occupation, wealth, race and other factors, due to systemic injustices.

We also are living through significant political unrest, as seen in numerous protests and the storming of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. The country as a whole is seeing physical violence on a large scale, which makes us feel fearful and scared of what the future may hold.

Additionally, we are seeing racial trauma on a collective scale. People of color feel threatened and unsafe, and experience racism on a regular basis.

These collective traumas are happening at the same time each person across the whole country is trying to manage his or her own individual traumas, mental health, relationships, etc.

People across the state of Texas recently experienced the collective trauma of Winter Storm Uri. Texans were left with no electricity, water or food in the midst of 0-degree weather. Even in the midst of a pandemic, families had to find refuge and safety because of bursting pipes or lacking heat that made their homes unlivable. We were scrambling to make sure we had the necessities to survive, while also trying to make sure our friends and family were cared for, as well. Some individuals literally froze to death in their homes while waiting for power to be restored.

Reacting to trauma is normal

It is important to normalize trauma reactions that might happen during this time, such as feeling more anxious. We have experienced a lot of unknowns. We are seeing death all around us. Jobs are uncertain. We miss

being with our communities physically. It can be hard to find solid ground to stand on.

Experiencing anxiety does not show lack of faith in God; it shows the world can be a scary place, and our bodies feel the need to react.

It is normal to have "brain fog" and not be as productive as you have been in the past. Your body is holding the trauma of everything happening around you. Chronic stress makes it harder for your brain to focus on things. Your brain and body are trying to keep up with everything happening around you, and that may be too much to process.

During a collective trauma, individual trauma reactions also may rise to the surface more than usual. For instance, if someone has mild depression on a daily basis, that person might experience more significant depression during a collective trauma.

Think of it as a glass of water. Everyone's glass—representing their life—might be 90 percent full on any given day. Add an individual trauma, and it's completely full. Add a compound collective trauma, and the glass is spilling over completely. As church leaders, we need to be aware of how this may manifest in us and also pay close attention to how our congregants are responding.

Four ways ministry leaders can help

There are some things pastors can do to help congregants with compound collective trauma handle it a little more smoothly.

1. Offer lots and lots of grace. Give an abundance of grace to yourself and others. Give yourself grace as you find yourself with less patience or productivity. Give others grace as they expect you to solve all of the problems or get short with you. We are not acting as our normal selves,

which is to be expected. More energy goes toward surviving, which means less energy is devoted to other areas of our lives.

2. Help your congregants feel in control of things they can control. Right now, everything feels out of our control. And most of it is. However, there are some things we can control. Right now would not be the time to change something drastically in your congregation without getting the input of your congregants. People need to feel like *something* is in their control. Anytime you can give people choices about how something is done will be helpful.

3. Listen to your body. Your body will have different needs during this time than it usually does. If your body is telling you that you need more sleep, then honor it by trying to get more sleep. If you are feeling sad, honor the sadness as a legitimate emotion and pause to reflect on why you are feeling sad.

4. Adjust expectations of what life will look like after these collective traumas have passed. Collective trauma changes the fabric of a community. We have lived within compound collective trauma for a year, which inevitably will change the way communities and congregations function for the rest of time.

Dear ones, may we give grace freely, and may that grace be enough.

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