

Victim/Survivors of Mass Violence and Other Traumatic Events and the COVID-19 Pandemic: What Do We Know, and What Should We Do?

A message from Dean Kilpatrick, NMVVRC Director:

In his first inaugural, President Franklin Roosevelt told the American people that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” His remarks referred to the Great Depression that produced widespread financial hardships for most Americans. The COVID- 19 pandemic is a multifaceted challenge unlike anything we have seen in our lifetime due to its scope, invisible nature, disruption of our usual ways of interacting, and impact on our physical, financial, and psychological health. A healthy fear of this pandemic is not baseless. The right amount of fear is good because it propels us to take proper precautions, but too much fear is harmful to our physical and mental health.

This pandemic is characterized by many uncertainties. Uncertainty breeds fear. Placing our fears in proper perspective is crucial but difficult to do without accurate information, and there is much that we still do not know. We don’t know the percentage of the population in our communities who are infected with the virus. We don’t know whether someone we encounter is infected because many people do not have symptoms when they are contagious. We don’t know if we, or those we love, will become infected and what will happen if they do. We don’t know if the health care system will be able to care for us if we get seriously ill. We don’t know if we and those we love will be able to weather the financial challenges posed by this pandemic. We do not know when life will return to some version of normal. Given all these uncertainties, it is not surprising that many of us are concerned, anxious, stressed out, and fearful.

These problems are often magnified among those who previously experienced mass violence or other large-scale traumatic events, such as the Flint Water Crisis or the Camp Fire in California. As anyone knows who has been through these experiences, the effects are long lasting and consume our mental and physical energy. However resilient survivors might be, they continue to carry a heavy burden that makes it more difficult to cope with the pandemic. Also, there are only three things we can do that have been proven to reduce our risk of exposure to the virus. Frequent handwashing and not touching your face are effective and not problematic. But staying physically distant from other people is a special challenge for survivors because it separates them from friends, family, and others who provide them with love and support, which are critically important for recovery. Survivors must navigate how to maintain social closeness when they are physically distant.

We at the NMVVRC know that these are difficult times for survivors, and we would like to reduce your uncertainty as much as possible by sharing information and tips that you may find helpful. It may also be helpful to remember that our people have been through many catastrophic challenges in the past and managed to get through them. This pandemic will be no exception as long as we place it in proper perspective, pull together, and help each other.