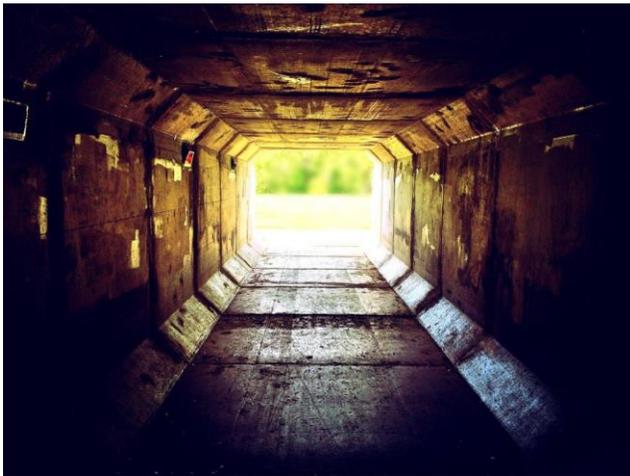


Survivor's guilt and other ways the collective trauma we've endured may show up

by [Vu](#), [January 25, 2021](#)

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<https://nonprofitaf.com/2021/01/survivors-guilt-and-other-ways-the-collective-trauma-weve-endured-may-show-up/>



[Image description: Some type of tunnel, with an opening at the end leading outside and light streaming in. It looks industrial, old, and metallic. Image by [PixLord on Pixabay](#)]

A few years ago, I discovered a personal pattern: Anytime that I had five or more consecutive days off, I would immediately get sick the first three days. Talking to other nonprofit leaders, I found out it was not unusual. It's as if our bodies were so busy dealing with one crisis after another at our jobs that we just didn't have time to get sick, and it catches up to us all at once when we have a moment to breathe.

Last week was the inauguration of US President Biden and Vice President Harris. I don't think any of us believe that having a new US president will instantly solve everything. White supremacy and injustice will not end just because there's a new administration. But this change at least allows us a moment to catch our breath, to take a break, and maybe get out of survival mindset long enough to assess how to best move forward.

However, to move forward effectively, we have to acknowledge how much trauma we've all endured and be intentional about how we address it. The effects of holding so much stress and anxiety for so long will likely hit us in all sorts of different ways, as individuals, as a sector, and as a society. I am not an expert in trauma, but here are a few things we should keep in mind:

1. **Mental health:** I know so many colleagues who have anxiety, depression, or a combination of mental health issues. It has increased significantly over the past few years. If you think this might apply to you, please go get help. Let's destigmatize mental health challenges by creating space to talk about it and support one another. Check in

often with colleagues. Ensure mental health care is included in your benefits package. Funders, pay more attention in this area and fund accordingly.

2. **Physical health:** I've had the worst sleep since 2016. Some of this was because of being a parent of small children, but a lot of it was because of the generalized collective anxiety we all felt. Besides sleep issues, there are host of other things that have been worsened for everyone: chronic health conditions, muscle tension, fatigue, etc. Let's be supportive of one another, as well as ensure accessibility and accommodations for disabilities.
3. **Cognitive functions:** I find that I've been less able to focus, and I forget things more. I've also really had to double check my ability to judge situations and make decisions. I get mentally tired quicker, so sometimes I make decisions just to get it over with so I can get back to less mentally taxing things. If you feel like you haven't been able to think as quickly or as clearly as before, you are not alone. We're going to have to be patient with one another, as we're likely going to have more lapses in judgment and make more mistakes as we do our work.
4. **Emotional regulation:** Trauma affects our ability to [regulate our emotions](#). This includes getting frustrated more readily, finding difficulty calming down after getting upset, becoming sad more easily, having quickly changing moods, etc. For me, it means I've snapping at people a lot more and losing patience with people faster.
5. **Addiction and recovery:** This has been a significant challenge over the past few years, and it's been made worse by the pandemic. Because there is still a heavy stigma against addiction, combined with a culture that constantly jokes about and encourages drinking (a culture that I admit I often engaged in), it can be hard for colleagues to be open about addiction and recovery challenges that they may be going through. If this is you, please seek help. Let's create space to talk about it and get support, and let's all be more thoughtful about when we joke about drinking, rehab, etc.
6. **Hypervigilance:** [This](#) is a "state of heightened alertness accompanied by behavior that aims to prevent danger." We and the people we serve have been constantly surrounded by danger under this previous administration. This has conditioned us to always be on the alert. Watching the inauguration, something that was hopeful, I still felt stressed, thinking that at any moment something awful might happen. After years of this, it does take a toll and may affect us and our work in ways we may not be able to anticipate.
7. **Survivor's guilt:** [Defined here](#) as "when a person has feelings of guilt because they survived a life-threatening situation when others did not." On social media, I see many posts lamenting the fact that so many people did not make it to the inauguration because of COVID, or they were killed by the police, or because they died from lack of health care or shelter. Survivor's guilt in our sector may also include the guilt we feel when our colleagues are laid off or when other nonprofits close down. It is something we will need to be cognizant of, as this feeling of guilt will affect our wellbeing and work.
8. **Black, Indigenous, POCs, LGBTQIA, disabled people:** While we've all experienced some level of trauma these past few years, it is the most marginalized folks who have borne the brunt of it. The above effects are reinforced by constant bigotry, racism, xenophobia, ableism, transphobia, etc. We're going to have to be thoughtful and intentional about ensuring that resources are going to these communities to even begin the process for healing.

I know that's a lot to think about. And after so many years of constant stress, it's tempting to put it aside and focus on more pressing things. But these above and other factors shape our mental health and other areas, often on an unconscious level, so it's important to take time to discuss them and take actions as individuals, organizations, or as a sector when appropriate. Otherwise, we may not be as effective as we can be, especially when often we are the ones out there helping people who are even more traumatized. We also risk passing on our trauma to the next generation of professionals in our sector.

Let's all acknowledge that we went through a harrowing nightmare that we're just starting to maybe wake up from, and we're all rattled by various degrees, and we need to support one another through it. As activist Brittany Packnett Cunningham (@MsPackyetti on Twitter) says: *"I really think the trauma and grief of the last ___ years is only starting to emerge and we're gonna have to be extra patient with ourselves and one another. There are going to be layers. It is going to take time. And we still gotta survive."*