

Webinar Focus

The Partners for Advancing Health Equity Collaborative hosted the webinar, *Responding to Mental Health in Times of Crisis* on June 17, 2024. Panelists engaged in discussions about the mental health challenges experienced during crises, highlighting the need to prioritize mental health in crisis responses. This report provides a synthesis of key takeaways, solutions, and action steps identified from the webinar.

Webinar Voices

- › **Caryn Bell**, Associate Director, P4HE, [Tulane School of Public Health & Tropical Medicine](#)
- › **Raquel Martin**, [Clinical Psychologist; Professor, Tennessee State University](#)
- › **Leslie Nolan**, [Behavioral Health Division Director, Imperial Calcasieu Human Services Authority](#)
- › **Brett Ford**, Associate Professor of Psychology, University of Toronto; [Director of the Affective Science & Health Laboratory](#)

Key Resources

- [Successive Disasters and Community Resilience](#)
- [Integrating Mental Health in Disaster Responses](#)
- [Integrated Mental Health Care Services During Disasters](#)

Your Voice

P4HE values collaboration. If there is a resource on this topic that you would like to share with us, provide it [here](#).

Key Takeaways

Recent events and crises, such as the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), police killings, wars and human exploitation across the globe, discriminatory policy changes, and visible effects of climate change, have increased mental health challenges, especially for marginalized groups. People and organizations across sectors committed to health equity must prioritize mental health in crisis responses and center the needs and voices of those experiencing the most harm to develop interventions that will effectively address mental health, well-being, and equity.



Webinar participants shared policy or practice changes that could support mental health during crises, including **paid leave; mental health days; flexible schedules; mental health services in schools and workplaces; healing-centered and trauma-informed approaches; greater access to information, resources, and services;** and **staff trainings on mental health.**

Call To Action



“Our bodies and minds have limits. If you think about resilience like a container, we dip into it [for] one crisis [and again for] another crisis. When you have crises mounting...we scrape the bottom and there’s nothing left. We haven’t had the opportunity to replenish in between.”

Brett Ford, Associate Professor of Psychology, University of Toronto; Director of the Affective Science & Health Laboratory

Below we've summarized immediate action steps shared by the panelists and identified by webinar participants to be taken to advance health equity.

> Foster a culture of empathy and compassion to buffer against crises.

Whether it's on a personal, community, or national level, it is important to foster a culture of empathy and compassion in recognition of the impending crises that individuals and communities are dealing with. Times of crisis are filled with uncertainty and ever-changing circumstances to adapt to, causing stress and anxiety about how to overcome adversity. Crises take a toll on both mental and physical health, and there are limits to how much minds and bodies can endure while maintaining sustainable operation. When [multiple crises are happening simultaneously](#), this can exacerbate the stressors in our lives. Simultaneous crises often compound the negative effects on mental health as there is no opportunity to replenish our mental and physical states. It is important to ensure that expressions of grace and patience are [common practice in all sectors](#) as crises have ripple effects throughout society. Cross-sector collaborations aimed to address mental health during crises and promote equity must prioritize initiatives that demonstrate understanding and compassion for the multifaceted hardships that communities face.

Consider strategies to support each other during challenging times. This approach fosters a sense of unity and mutual support during crises. This includes being considerate of the cascading impacts of crises and how they may create additional sources of stress and anxiety for communities. Promoting vulnerability is one way to [recognize the shared experiences and emotions](#) within the community. To gain insights about the mental health challenges experienced by people in various communities during and after crises, [engage directly with these individuals](#), [conduct surveys](#), and listen to anecdotes about how specific crises have affected their livelihoods. Such community interactions and research will inform on the prevalence of mental health issues and strengthen a sense of unity and resilience among the community.



"When we are in a period of crisis, whether it's an individual crisis or community crisis, we have to extend grace to others and know that they're not operating at their best – and we probably aren't either."

Leslie Nolan, Behavioral Health Division Director, Imperial Calcasieu Human Services Authority

> Acknowledge the structural obstacles that exacerbate crises and negatively impact mental health.

There are numerous systems and structures in place that perpetuate inequities for marginalized communities. When crises occur, they reveal functional limitations within systems, the interconnectedness of all sectors of society, and the structural barriers that prevent marginalized communities from achieving equity. The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) was a clear example of this as

marginalized communities faced disparities in access to quality healthcare and resources to treat COVID-19 and its effects. Not only did they lack adequate healthcare, but the shift from normalcy during the pandemic also [disproportionately impacted marginalized individuals in the workforce](#), especially [frontline and essential workers](#), -- all while the [Black Lives Matter movement](#) simultaneously reached its peak in mobilizing people against horrendous police killings and unjust practices targeting Black and brown people. Such simultaneous crises and their consequences have demonstrated the continued legacy of oppression that marginalized communities endure in all facets of society, resulted in [a loss of trust in systems among these groups](#), and compounded their historical and present-day trauma and stress. The underlying systems that exacerbate crises have tremendous implications on the mental health of marginalized communities as they are forced to [tackle many sources of stress](#) without the supports and privileges granted to their White, wealthier counterparts.



"[We need] to acknowledge the fact that there are systems in place that constitute these harms and then acknowledge how we're going to break those down. If another crisis happens, the people are going to be less likely to seek services." Raquel Martin, Clinical Psychologist;

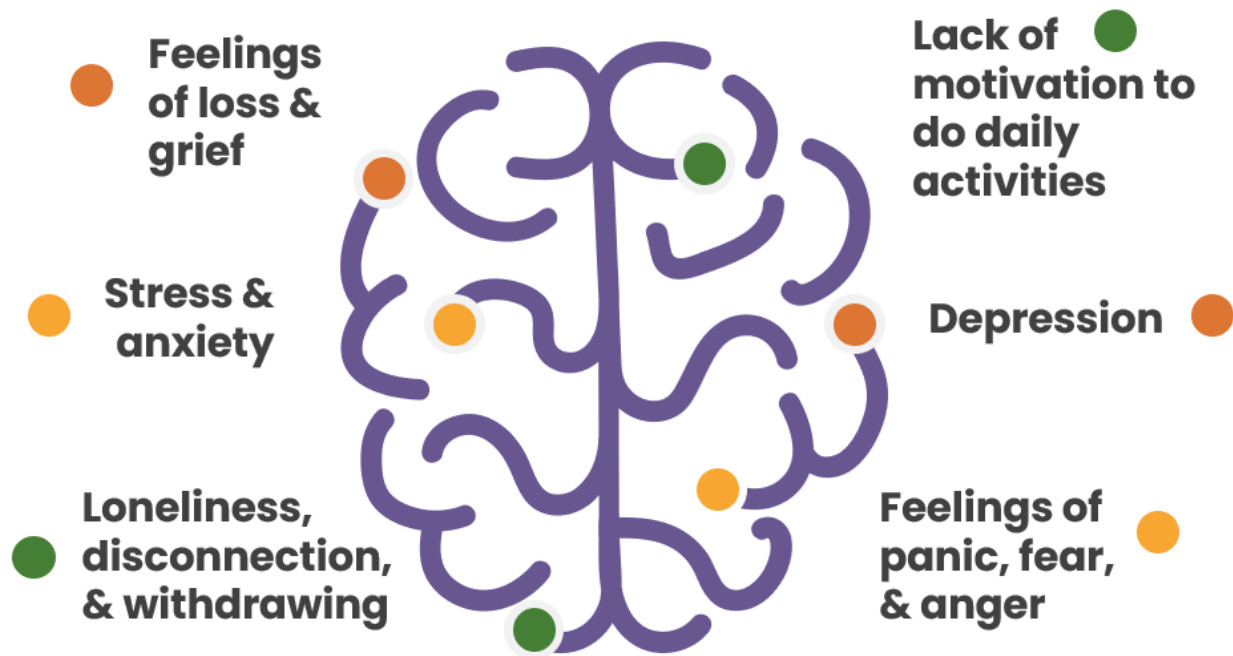
Professor, Tennessee State University

To begin to understand the ways that structural barriers affect crises and compound mental health challenges, engage with community members about their experiences and perspectives and needs. [Conduct further research](#) on crises and their disproportionate effects on mental health for marginalized groups to help map these experiences to their root causes and ways to address them, especially for instances of simultaneous crises. Consider [intersectional identities](#) and the [role of gender in response to crises](#). These identities may worsen the mental health of these individuals during crises. For example, [women are often burdened as caregivers](#), such gender-based expectations can cause further disparities in mental health struggles during these times.

> Show consideration of individual mental health challenges through extending grace and patience during crises.

Mental stability and well-being should be valued and not compromised, especially in times of great fear and uncertainty. It's essential not just to consider the mental health needs of others, but also to stand up for one's own mental health needs. In advocacy endeavors, the virtues of patience and grace can serve as powerful tools. They can help in navigating the potential disappointment that might arise from those who may overlook or downplay mental health issues, even during crisis situations. Patience allows for understanding and time for change, while grace provides the kindness and compassion needed in these challenging circumstances.

Mental Health Challenges Experienced During Crises



> Collaborate to address systemic issues and drive change.

In times of crisis, it is crucial for individuals from various sectors to collaborate to enhance mental health. This includes philanthropic organizations providing funding and resources, policymakers involving communities in the creation of policies and programs, businesses adapting internal policies and practices to support their employees, advocacy groups championing transformative strategies, and [young people contributing their passion and insights about the importance of mental health](#). Collaborations across these sectors empower partners to ineffective policies and practices solutions that tackle mental health issues during crises, thereby promoting health equity.

To overcome the structural obstacles that exacerbate crises and the mental health of oppressed groups, people from various organizations must come together to collectively reflect on how they might be part of the problem, design solutions that break down such barriers, and gain the trust of these communities. Collaborating across sectors will allow for partners to analyze crises and subsequent mental health challenges from all points of view and implement innovative initiatives in pursuit of systemic change toward health equity.

› Create and change policies and practices to help alleviate mental health challenges experienced during crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic helped us realize that [current systems, policies, and practices do not operate effectively](#) to serve communities, especially during crises. Whether it was the lack of access to quality healthcare services, challenges in obtaining workplace accommodations, [disruptions in education for students](#), or loss of in-person gatherings and connections – all these factors and more contributed to the increased mental health challenges experienced throughout the country and the world. Widespread change at the systemic level and organizational level is necessary to address the mental health needs that are exacerbated during times of crisis. One major change that could help would be to institute [paid leave policies](#) that allow people to take time off to seek care for their physical and mental health concerns. As justification for this policy change, consider *“How are people supposed to do what they need to when they have to take a pay hit to go to the doctor?”*, suggests Brett Ford, Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto and Director of the Affective Science & Health Laboratory.



“A lot of times people think mental health is the first solution, but it’s actually equal pay and appropriate leave and healthcare and funding for programs.” Raquel Martin, Clinical Psychologist; Professor, Tennessee State University

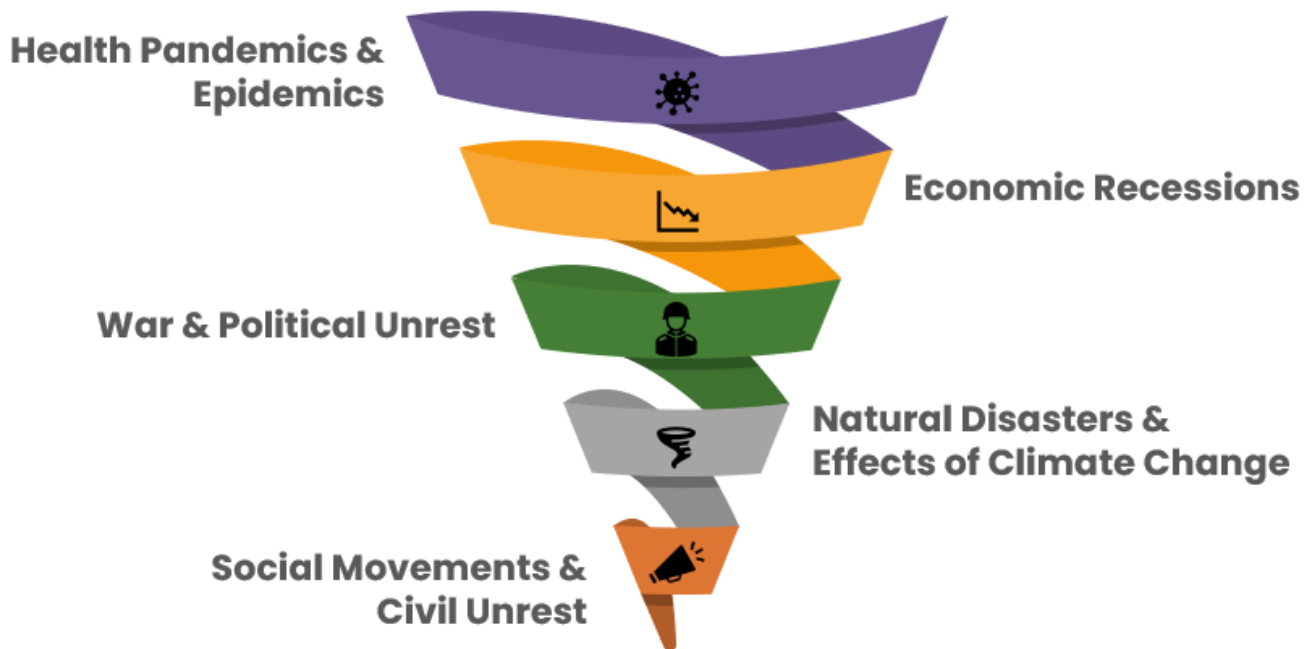
Both organizational practices and societal resources are critical in the promotion of mental health. It is important to value people over productivity and implement practices that prioritize employees’ well-being over profits in everyday work. This is particularly important during crises when employees may be under increased stress.

[Workplace accommodations](#), such as remote work, hybrid and flexible schedules, and frequent breaks, should apply to all industries when possible to account for mental health concerns among employees. Health care professionals do not adequately take care of themselves as they should due to their demanding jobs, especially during national or local health crises. Flexible work policies are another strategy to better the mental health of health care professionals. These policies facilitate a balance of in-person and remote work that alleviates persistent occupational stressors. In the health care sector, remote work encompasses the provision of [virtual telehealth services](#).

To adequately support mental health initiatives and provide resources, there needs to be sufficient funding. This includes increasing funding in the health care field through [scholarships and loan repayment programs](#). This can help individuals, particularly those from marginalized groups, to pursue health education and enter the health care and mental health workforce with less financial and emotional stress. Additional funding should be allocated to develop and implement [crisis and emergency responses](#) that [prioritize mental health](#), [culturally appropriate treatments](#), and

[integrated mental health care services](#). This includes [mental health supports in schools](#) for youth, which is crucial for early intervention and prevention.

Simultaneous Crises Have Compounding Effects & Cause Mental Health to Spiral



Deeper Dive

Survey Findings on Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The [Pew Research Center](#) summarized a [collection of survey findings](#) on mental health challenges among people in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. The web article outlined five key findings based on surveys from the Pew Research Center and the [Centers of Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#). Overall, the surveys found (1) high levels of psychological stress among adults, (2) mental health challenges among high school students, (3) mental health as a key concern among parents for their children's well-being, (4) worries among parents about the effects of their children's

social media use on their mental health, and (5) reflections from parents that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative effect on their children’s emotional well-being. These survey findings can guide cross-sector collaborators in developing and implementing initiatives that address the widespread mental health issues experienced during crises.

Emotional Well-Being and Coping During Crises

The [University of California, San Francisco, Weill Institute for Neurosciences, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences](#) hosts a [webpage](#) with various resources and tips for managing one’s emotional and mental state during crises. The information provided in this webpage is tailored to different challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. A few general tips include: limiting media use to reduce anxiety, maintaining social connections with others, expressing patience and compassion during difficult times, being mindful of opportunities to experience joy and gratitude, and prioritizing healthy eating habits. The authors outlined useful guidance and techniques for coping with acute stress experienced during crises and for maintaining good sleep. The webpage also linked various videos and online classes for workouts, guided meditations, and mindfulness sessions to help individuals maintain physical activity and reduce stress. People across sectors can refer to these tips and resources when serving the mental health needs of their communities during crises.

About P4HE

The P4HE Collaborative harmonizes goals, advances learning, and facilitates collaboration to improve health equity. It is led by the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine and is part of the Tulane Institute for Innovations in Health Equity. Support for this program is provided by ICF. Funding is provided by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.



Foster

the co-creation and spread of knowledge.



Sharpen

our research tools to focus on solutions, facts and stories.



Disrupt

traditional research approaches.



Harmonize

our voices.



Challenge

the status quo.



Shine

light on practices that are indefensible, irrational and inconsistent.

To learn more about these issues, or Partners for Health Equity’s calls to action, a resource library including a full recording of this, and all previous P4HE Webinars, can be found on the P4HE [website](#).