



# Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H05USD  
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG  
SEPTEMBER 14, 2020

## **ARTICLE** **LEADERSHIP & MANAGING** **PEOPLE**

Don't Just Lead Your  
People Through  
Trauma. Help Them  
Grow.

*by Jamil Zaki*

LEADERSHIP & MANAGING PEOPLE

# Don't Just Lead Your People Through Trauma. Help Them Grow.

by Jamil Zaki  
SEPTEMBER 14, 2020



IMAGE SOURCE/GETTY IMAGES

The last several months have stacked painful experiences on top of each other: a global pandemic, economic collapse, and new reminders of perennial racial injustice and police violence. This July, rates of depression and anxiety in the U.S. were more than [triple](#) those of early 2019. The simple question, “How are you?” has turned into an emotional minefield.

Workplaces are saturated with trauma, too, and leaders are agonizing over how to keep their teams healthy as everyone works remotely and juggles any number of stressors. The science of trauma offers some insight about this moment, and some surprising hope: Instead of asking how we will recover from these painful times, we should ask how we will be changed by them. In many cases, we have an opportunity to change for the better.

In October 2001, researchers [surveyed](#) thousands of Americans about their experiences in the wake of the World Trade Center attack. How often did they have intrusive memories of 9/11? How much trouble were they having sleeping, concentrating, and connecting with others? Four percent of respondents — and 11% of New York City residents — met the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, even though none had been in the towers that day.

Events like 9/11 are psychological earthquakes that [shatter our assumptions](#) that the world is safe and just, even if we're not in imminent danger ourselves. They lay bare how vulnerable we are — and how little we control. PTSD is the most well-known outcome of trauma, and often presents as long-term, debilitating difficulty recovering a sense of safety and stability. However, it's not as common as you might think. In an analysis of 54 studies surveying tens of thousands of people, psychologist Isaac Galatzer-Levy and his colleagues [examined](#) how individuals fared in the months and years after suffering traumas including serious injuries, loss of loved ones, and combat. They found that 65% of survivors showed a “[resilient trajectory](#),” remaining psychologically stable.

Even more surprising is that many survivors experience *increased* well-being after trauma. In the aftermath of shocking events, people often start over and rethink their priorities. They might change careers to better match their values or reconnect with estranged friends. Many experience greater purpose, stronger social connections, or deepened spirituality. Psychologists call this “posttraumatic growth,” or PTG, and it's fairly common: In one [meta-study](#) of more than 10,000 trauma survivors, about 50% reported at least some PTG.

No one would choose to endure trauma, but it's helpful to keep in mind that even terrible moments can have positive effects. For all its horrors, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced many of us into a [more sustainable](#) way of life, and has [encouraged kindness around the world](#). Anguish over police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and too many others has [galvanized](#) a fight for racial justice. Employees are demanding more equality in company hiring and management practices and are encouraging their employers to support social justice initiatives.

Managers and leaders should take this to heart. Rather than aiming for a recovery or asking employees to return to normal, they should ask bigger questions about how their organizations can grow through this moment. Here two insights from psychological science can help: affirming values and emphasizing community.

## Affirm Values

Many managers and leaders I've talked with are losing sleep not only over their own struggles, but over those of their colleagues and employees, whose sense of security and self-worth have been jeopardized. One way to combat these threats is to focus on the values that define us, regardless of the circumstances.

When psychologist George Bonanno and his colleagues [surveyed](#) people directly impacted by 9/11, they found that those who reported a clear sense of [purpose](#) and [autonomy](#) were more likely to remain resilient in the 18 months following the attacks.

A simple exercise in values affirmation can help boost team morale and restore a shared sense of purpose. Have team members list their most important guiding principles – for instance, helping others or expressing creativity – and write about why those values matter to them. Participating in an affirmation exercise like this [produces powerful, long-term results](#), including fostering resilience and growth in the face of adversity.

Leaders can and should take this moment to affirm their organization's values as well. Here it's critical to be concrete. When the values on a company's wall diverge from the reality on the ground, talk alone can [produce disenchantment](#) and cynicism. If you want to emphasize well-being for your team, allocate time and resources for employee mental health. If you want to [address racial justice](#), go [beyond bias training](#) and rethink your company policies and systems; for instance, commit to [diversifying top leadership](#). By linking words and action, you can help your team focus not just on what they do, but why they're doing it.

## Emphasize Community

Survivors are more likely to experience PTG when they have a [supportive community](#) with which they can openly share experiences. In one study, psychologists [surveyed](#) residents of Madrid following the 2004 terrorist bombing in the city at one, three, and eight weeks after the event. The attack socially magnetized Spaniards who immediately after talked more often with neighbors, friends, and family about their emotions. And eight weeks after the attack, people who had talked more in the early days felt increased solidarity and connection with fellow Madrileños, as well as a greater sense of meaning and positivity.

Social connection has rarely been more important, or more difficult to maintain. Our new video-conference reality lacks in-between moments in hallways and breakrooms, time for processing, kibitzing, and hanging out, all of which are vital to foster community. Thankfully, there are ways to [restore connection, even at a distance](#). Leaders can build time into meetings for check-ins, and be open to the messy intimacy that comes with seeing coworkers' homes and meeting their families and pets. Leaders can create peer-to-peer [support networks](#) in which working parents, those caring for sick relatives, and other groups can discuss struggles and compare notes.

Values-based leadership and attention to community are always smart, but now they are mandatory. Under so-called normal circumstances, teams that are clear on their purpose work harder, smarter, and more collaboratively. And when leaders exhibit empathy, their employees feel safer, work more creatively, and [perform better](#). The pain of these past few months has destabilized us, but it has also held up a mirror, stripping away comfort and routine and revealing who we truly are. The choices we make in this moment will shape who we — and our organizations — become. In times of trauma, these strategies can help organizations not merely survive, but build what we wish had been there all along.

---

**Jamil Zaki** is a professor of psychology at Stanford University and author of [The War For Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World](#). His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

---