



RESILIENCE

A Practical Guide for Public Health Communicators

Sustaining health, safety, and purpose in public health communication through trauma-informed approaches



**information
futures lab**

PUBLIC HEALTH 
COMMUNICATIONS
COLLABORATIVE

Contents

Guide at a glance	2
Introduction	3
Build emotional literacy: Know what to expect.....	5
Respect your needs: Integrate self-care into daily routines	9
Be prepared: Assess threats and make a response plan	12
Build community: Foster trauma-informed practices in the workplace.....	16
More resources	19

WELCOME TO OUR GUIDE about resilience for public health communicators. Co-created by the Information Futures Lab (IFL) at Brown University and the Public Health Communications Collaborative (PHCC), we designed it to support the well-being and resilience of public health professionals.

Drawing from research, practice and lived experience, it offers trauma-informed strategies, leadership insights, self-care tools, and actionable steps to help sustain healthy and supportive public health workplaces.

Guide at a glance

Public health communicators today are working under immense pressure. Between polarized public discourse, online harassment, institutional uncertainty, and emotional fatigue, this work can take a toll. This guide offers practical, trauma-informed strategies to strengthen resilience at both the individual and organizational level. It draws from lessons learned in public health, journalism, and emergency response to help communicators sustain themselves and their teams while continuing to serve the public. The guidance is not meant to replace recommendations from a healthcare or mental health professional.

Four building blocks of resilience

#1 Build emotional literacy: Know what to expect

Understand how stress and trauma affect your body, mind, and behavior. Learn to recognize different types of stress — acute, chronic, distress, and eustress (positive stress). Normalize your reactions. Build your resilience as a process, not a trait.

#2 Respect your needs: Integrate self-care into daily routines

Resilience starts with acknowledging what sustains you. Incorporate small habits that restore calm, set boundaries, and support you. Reframe self-care as something you can do to foster your well-being and prevent burnout.

#3 Be prepared: Assess threats and make a response plan

Preparation reduces fear and builds agency. Assess risks, review your online presence, identify assets to protect, and know internal reporting procedures. If harassment occurs, document evidence, notify leadership, secure accounts, and care for your mental health.

#4 Build community: Foster trauma-informed practices in the workplace

Resilience grows in connected, caring teams. Cultivate open communication, create peer-support systems, and lead or contribute with transparency and fairness. Help reinforce physical, digital, and psychological safety for yourself and your teams.

How to use this guide

Resilience grows through practice, so this guide is meant to be a companion. You can get started by familiarizing yourself with the overall framework, either reading from the beginning or starting with where you are, by turning to the section that speaks to what you're experiencing right now. Return to this guide whenever you need grounding, ideas, or reassurance.

Each section offers short framing, reflections and practical steps:

- **Build emotional literacy** – understand how stress and trauma affect you.
- **Respect your needs** – integrate daily self-care and boundaries.
- **Be prepared** – plan for safety and agency in challenging situations.
- **Build community** – strengthen trust, communication, and peer support.

A few tips:

- Use the “Try This” prompts to experiment with small habits that help you recover, reset, and reconnect.
- Bring excerpts or exercises into staff meetings, supervision sessions, or wellness check-ins.
- Adapt this guide and make it yours. Add local resources, hotlines, or organizational protocols. This guide is meant to evolve with you or your team.

Introduction

Let's face it.

This is a challenging time to be a public health communicator.

In a few short years, public health has moved from an unseen effort to become a field facing increased scrutiny and scorn. As disdain for public health is normalized on a national stage, those doing the work on the ground can get caught in the crosshairs of public confusion, valid frustrations, and deliberate targeting of the public health workforce.

Harassment is now an occupational hazard.

From extreme, isolated events such as a shooter targeting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to an increase in disturbing Zoom bombings to public health colleagues finding their private information shared widely (a tactic called ‘doxxing’) – online and offline harassment, aggression and intimidation are now an occupational hazard. In this reality, it can be challenging to balance the mission of transparently serving the public with the need for physical and emotional safety.

Uncertainty is the norm.

Adding to the load, rapid changes in federal policies and funding structures are simultaneously creating renewed uncertainty and instability in the workplace. After ongoing dismissals at the federal and state level, some colleagues are working on reinvention after being let go, while others may experience guilt over still being employed, alongside exhaustion from increased workloads and a lack of strategic direction.

Fatigue and loss of purpose slip in.

All of this adds to the burden of a workforce already confronting potential burnout. After years of crises, from the opioid epidemic to the COVID-19 pandemic to political division to climate emergencies, communicators may feel a kind of existential fatigue. And ask themselves: Does this work still matter?

Moral injury is real.

As these challenges intersect, witnessing actions that violate one's moral and ethical beliefs can deepen the emotional impact. Actions such as cuts that make accessing healthcare and lifesaving measures harder for those already struggling, or that threaten the nation's ability to respond to infectious diseases.

For a pragmatic, solutions-oriented field, the pace and chaotic nature of these changes can be disorienting and at times paralyzing. At the same time, many public health communicators may lack clear authority or protection when crises erupt, as they sit between leadership, departments, subject matter experts, and community partners.

It's time to reset.

Let's get back in the driver's seat.

Anticipating, planning and communicating with colleagues, leadership and friends and family members ahead of time are key to staying safe and reclaiming agency over what is happening.

We don't have to go this alone.

There is a lot we can learn and incorporate into the public health workforce from each other, journalists, public responders, and others who have been here before.

Knowing what to expect, how to respond, and who to reach out to for different types of support at different times are key building blocks of resilience.

This resource serves as a starting point and companion on your journey to building out your resilience practice.

#1

Build emotional literacy: Know what to expect

As a first step, it helps to better understand what trauma and resilience is and how it affects our biochemistry, feelings and thoughts.

- Being aware of the impact of stressful events on our bodies, and what reactions to look out for, allows us to gain perspective.
- Similarly, understanding what builds resilience allows us to access effective coping strategies that promote gradual recovery.

Studies with emergency medical technicians (EMTs) and firefighters, for example, show that education about trauma and acute stress — and training in how to respond — can reduce the negative impact of these experiences on an individual's resilience and mental health. Similarly, journalists find that building such 'emotional literacy' helps with navigating dangerous assignments (such as covering a violent protest) or being subjected to a smear campaign and open hostility.

Deciphering stress

Stress is not always a bad thing. In fact, it's part of what keeps us alive. Our bodies are designed to notice change, mobilize energy, and respond to challenges. What matters is how much stress we experience, how long it lasts, and whether we have space and support to recover.

Think of stress as a *continuum* rather than a single state. We move along this line many times a day, as well as over months and years, depending on what's happening around us and inside us.

IN THIS SECTION

- » Deciphering stress
- » The nature of trauma
- » The power of resilience
- » When it's time to seek support

The Stress Continuum



TYPE OF STRESS	DESCRIPTION	COMMON PHYSICAL RESPONSES	COMMON EMOTIONAL / COGNITIVE RESPONSES	WHAT HELPS RECOVERY
Eustress (Positive or Adaptive)	Short-term stress that motivates action. Occurs when challenges feel meaningful, manageable.	Mild adrenaline and cortisol release, increased alertness, faster heartbeat, energized muscles.	Focused, alert, motivated, confident.	Short breaks, hydration, movement, positive reinforcement, adequate sleep.
Acute Stress (Immediate “Fight-Flight-Freeze” Response)	The body’s rapid reaction to an immediate challenge or threat. Intense but brief; resolves when safety returns.	Surge of adrenaline, rapid heart rate, shallow breathing, muscle tension, dilated pupils.	Shock, anxiety, irritability, or heightened alertness.	Deep breathing, grounding techniques, movement, reassurance, and recovery time once the event passes.
Distress (Overload)	Stress that temporarily exceeds coping capacity or continues without recovery.	Sustained muscle tension, headaches, elevated blood pressure, digestive disruption.	Fatigue, irritability, reduced patience, negative thinking, loss of empathy.	Intentional rest, social connection, time away from digital devices, boundary setting, supportive supervision.
Chronic Stress (Persistent, relentless)	Persistent activation of the stress response over weeks or months; the body stays “on alert.”	Continuous cortisol elevation, weakened immune system, sleep disruption, inflammation.	Brain fog, emotional exhaustion, detachment, hopelessness, burnout.	Routine self-care, physical activity, therapy, realistic workload planning, consistent recovery rituals.
Toxic or Traumatic Stress (Long-lasting, either from chronic stress or traumatic events)	Severe, prolonged, or unpredictable stress – especially without control or social support.	Dysregulated nervous system; hypervigilance, startle response, hormonal imbalance, chronic fatigue.	Intrusive memories, avoidance, numbing, hyperarousal, emotional dysregulation.	Trauma-informed therapy, peer and community support, safety planning, grounding and mindfulness, gradual recovery.

The nature of trauma

Trauma is a word we use a lot for a lot of things, but in clinical terms, it has a specific meaning. For the purpose of this guide, it helps to distinguish between an individual traumatic event, cumulative trauma, and vicarious trauma – each affecting the mind and body in different ways.

What clinicians mean by trauma

Clinicians define a traumatic event as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence – whether experienced directly, witnessed, learned about happening to someone close, or through repeated or extreme exposure to details of such events (for example, through professional duties).

What's important about this definition is that trauma is not defined only by what happened, but by how it was experienced. If a situation made you feel unsafe, powerless, or profoundly threatened, you are the one who determines whether it was traumatic – not anyone else.

Experiencing a traumatic event triggers the acute stress described above. People may experience a variety of emotions and thoughts in the immediate hours and days afterwards, including shock, fear, sadness, anger, helplessness, or guilt, as well as intrusive thoughts, difficulty concentrating, and disrupted sleep. These are adequate reactions to extreme experiences. No two trauma responses are the same.

Cumulative and vicarious trauma

Cumulative trauma: When individuals experience repeated or prolonged exposure to stressful or threatening events – without adequate recovery. Over time, even smaller stressors can build into a significant psychological and physiological burden.

Vicarious trauma: Sometimes called *secondary trauma*, occurs when a person develops trauma-like symptoms after repeated exposure to others' distressing experiences or stories. For public health communicators, this can happen through monitoring social media, reading community accounts of loss or harm, or supporting colleagues who have been targeted. Symptoms can include emotional exhaustion, cynicism, or a sense of losing empathy – signals that it may be time to pause, seek support, and recalibrate.

The power of emotional resilience

The first and most important step after experiencing a traumatic event is getting back to safety. Only when we feel safe can we begin to process what happened.



Seeking support

Most people recover from a traumatic experience with time. For some, especially in the context of repeated exposure without recovery, symptoms persist and manifest in anxiety, PTSD and other challenges, and may require professional attention. There are many effective treatments for those who experience persistent symptoms, and professional societies recommend finding a trauma-trained counselor.

These are some warning signs to look out for that may indicate it's time to seek support:

- Isolation and withdrawal
- Unusual irritability or volatility
- Persistent and unwanted thoughts, especially ones in which you imagine yourself being harmed in some way
- Feelings of meaninglessness
- Self-medication, whether it's through substances, alcohol, or other habits

Since experiencing a traumatic event changes the biochemistry of our bodies, gradually rebalancing this biochemistry over time builds resilience.

Next to making space to feel those negative emotions that are an adequate reaction to what happened, we can make sure to add some positive moments to our days. This is why walks, yoga, a good conversation and other activities that release positive feelings are so often recommended.

Emotional resilience, then, is not about being unaffected by emotions, “getting over it,” forgetting or returning to the person we were before. Emotional resilience is our ability to integrate the adverse experiences into our lives and identity over time.

This guide is built to help you sustain and strengthen resilience through knowledge, self-care, preparation and community-building.

#2

Respect your needs: Integrate self-care into daily routines

Whether you are navigating persistent stress, uncertainty, harassment or other challenges, there are key things you can do to access effective coping strategies, ensure micro-recovery each day, and sustain your mental health and resilience in the long run. It starts with recognizing that self-care isn't a chore — it's a habit we can build and enjoy.

Ground your body

What: Short, body-based resets that calm the nervous system.

Why it matters: Stress begins in the body, and so does recovery.

▶ TRY THIS:

- Drink water before major meetings or crisis calls; hydration affects focus and mood.
- Use micro-breaks — two minutes of stretching or a slow walk after long digital sessions.
- Practice the 4-7-8 breathing pattern to reset after tense conversations.
- If you monitor social media, look away from screens every 30–45 minutes; change posture or step outside.

Create micro-routines of recovery

What: Predictable, small rituals that don't require effort to remember.

Why it matters: Predictability restores calm in chaotic contexts.

▶ TRY THIS:

- Anchor your day with consistent start-up and wind-down rituals — opening your blinds, lighting a candle, closing your laptop at a set time.
- Make a self-care sheet: Write down activities that release positive emotions, such as music, humor, sunlight, walks, reading, watching a show, spending time with pets, or calling a friend. Put it on your fridge door or somewhere else you see it every day. Begin deliberately integrating joyful acts into each workday.
- End the day intentionally. Replace doom-scrolling with a small sensory ritual — hand-washing, journaling, or listening to music that slows your breathing.

IN THIS SECTION

- » Ground your body
- » Create micro-routines of recovery
- » Protect your energy with boundaries
- » Reconnect and reach out
- » Restore perspective through reflection
- » Replenish joy and meaning
- » Seek and model support
- » Self-care for social media monitoring

Protect your energy with boundaries

What: Proactive over reactive self-management.

Why it matters: Without boundaries, urgency culture can become chronic stress.

▶ TRY THIS:

- Clarify what's in your control each week; release what isn't.
- Communicate limits early — for example, “I can respond by tomorrow afternoon.” Or: “I have flexibility to review talking points tomorrow evening but tonight I am not available.”
- Block 10-minute “white space” buffers between back-to-back meetings.
- Set a “digital sunset”: no checking messages after a chosen hour.
- When possible, decline or defer tasks that compromise rest or recovery.
- If there is repeated conflict between your recovery needs and your work schedule, seek a conversation with your supervisor or team.

Reconnect and reach out

What: Social connection, peer support, and collective care.

Why it matters: Connection counteracts isolation and helps metabolize stress.

▶ TRY THIS:

- Schedule short “connection sessions” to share challenges and wins with colleagues or friends and family.
- Identify 3–5 “steady people” you can be candid with about stress.
- Participate in or start a peer-support circle within your department or across departments.
- Normalize conversations about mental health — ask, “How are you holding up?” not just “What’s the status?”
- If a colleague is targeted online, check in and validate that it matters.



Self-care for social media monitoring

Monitoring online conversations is vital and can be uniquely stressful. If this is part of your role, try this:

- **Set time limits.** Rotate monitoring shifts and take visual breaks every 30–45 minutes.
- **Curate your feed.** Use filters or third-party dashboards to minimize direct exposure to harmful content.
- **De-personalize public content.** Trolls seek reaction, not resolution. Step away when comments feel triggering.
- **Ground yourself after logging off.** Stretch, hydrate, or step outside to reset before switching tasks.
- **Reach out.** Discuss with colleagues if a thread or post leaves you unsettled.

Restore perspective through reflection

What: Meaning-making and collective learning.

Why it matters: Reflection helps transform tension into growth.

▶ TRY THIS:

- Hold 15-minute reflective debriefs after major events or communications pushes.
- Keep a “done list” to recognize progress amid chaos.
- Name emotions (“I feel anxious,” “I’m tired”) before problem-solving; this reduces feeling overwhelmed.
- Journal one takeaway each week about what’s working for you.
- After layoffs or organizational shifts, create space for processing grief or guilt before moving into next steps.

Replenish joy and meaning

What: Joy, purpose, and small daily restorative activities.

Why it matters: Positive emotion and purpose help repair the toll of chronic stress.

▶ TRY THIS:

- Keep a “done” list. At the end of each day, note three small things accomplished. This shifts focus from deficit to progress.
- Keep a “gratitude folder” of community feedback and success stories to revisit on hard days.
- Once a week, see what weekly tasks align with personal or organizational values; this can help you notice why you are doing the work and renew motivation.
- Celebrate milestones – even sending a quick “thank you” note boosts your and the team’s morale.

Seek and model support

What: Knowing when and how to access help.

Why it matters: Self-care includes collective and professional care.

▶ TRY THIS:

- Reach out to a person you trust when you are feeling down.
- Utilize employee assistance, counseling programs or out of work resources when stress persists.
- Encourage leaders around you to model self-care, rest, therapy or coaching as normal professional tools.
- Ask for or offer colleagues flexibility or lighter duties after major stress events.
- Encourage that new staff is paired with experienced “buddies” to navigate challenging communications environments.

#3

Be prepared: Assess threats and make a response plan

Preparation is also an act of self-care. Taking time to assess risks and plan for different scenarios helps us increase our safety. It allows us to reclaim a sense of control in unpredictable environments. This section offers simple ways to think through personal and organizational vulnerabilities, identify assets worth protecting, and outline next steps if you or your team become targets of online or offline hostility.

Note: Doing a threat assessment can feel uncomfortable. It may surface anxieties or memories of past experiences. If at any point this feels overwhelming, pause. Take breaks. Talk it through with a trusted colleague, supervisor, or mental-health professional.

Remember: This assessment is not about anticipating the worst — it's about being ready for what might come.

IN THIS SECTION

- » Step 1: Ask key questions
- » Step 2: Build a personal safety network
- » Step 3: Know what to do when you become a target
- » How to build your safety and support plan

Step 1: Ask key questions

Use these questions to guide a basic threat assessment — both for yourself and for your organization.

1. Why might we become a target?

Consider the communities you serve and the topics you communicate about. Issues like vaccines, reproductive health, climate change, or infectious disease prevention may draw strong reactions. Reflect on whether your own identity or the identities of your colleagues — such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or immigration status — could make you more visible or vulnerable in polarized environments.

2. How are we being perceived online?

Search for your name, your organization, and key programs across social media platforms and search engines. Notice patterns: What narratives are circulating? Is there misinformation connected to your work? This can help you detect early warning signs of coordinated targeting or community frustration.

If you feel comfortable, conduct a gentle “self-doxxing” exercise — look up what personal information is publicly accessible about you and, per your assessment, take steps to limit it. Also set up a ‘Google alert’ or similar tool that notifies you when your name is mentioned online. Knowing what’s out there helps you take proactive steps to limit exposure later.

3. What assets do we need to protect?

Make a list of what you and your team handle each day: data, meeting notes, draft communications, contact lists, passwords, social media accounts. Which of these, if leaked or manipulated, could cause harm? Prioritize those for stronger protection measures (e.g., password managers, two-factor authentication, secure file sharing).

4. Who might target us — and what might they be capable of?

Potential sources of harassment or interference range from individual trolls to coordinated networks. Some may spread falsehoods online; others might attempt to breach accounts or intimidate staff. Others may send intimidating messages to someone's home. Understanding the scale of risk helps you right-size your response.

5. How big is the risk right now?

Assess how frequently your organization's work attracts controversy, how visible you are, and whether you've already seen signs of hostility. The Freedom of the Press Foundation's [Guide to Digital Security Risk Assessment](#) offers frameworks that you can adapt for public health communication practice.

6. What protections are already in place?

Review your workplace's existing policies: social media use, crisis communications, harassment reporting, physical security, and digital safety. Knowing what resources already exist — legal counsel, security staff, HR support, union support — will help you activate them quickly if needed.

Step 2: Build a personal safety network

There are key things you can do to strengthen your physical and emotional safety outside of institutional structures.

1. Let trusted people know what you do

Not everyone understands what public health communicators face. Tell close friends and family members a little about your work and why it sometimes draws unwanted attention. This helps them recognize potential risks and know how to support you if something happens.

Example: "If you ever see strange comments on my posts, please don't engage. Just take a screenshot and let me know."

2. Create a personal support chain

Identify 3-5 people you can reach out to quickly if you receive threats or feel unsafe. These may include:

- A close friend who can check in or stay on the phone if you're anxious.
- A neighbor or local contact who can help with safety logistics (like scanning for unfamiliar cars or packages).
- A colleague or peer in another organization who understands the field and can help with digital triage.

Keep these contacts in your phone and in a physical location you can access even if devices are compromised.

3. Make a home safety plan

- Review your privacy settings on personal social media accounts.
- Remove or obscure personal details such as home address, children's names, or school affiliations.
- Ask friends and relatives not to tag your location or post identifiable photos without permission.
- If your address or phone number has been shared publicly (doxxed), consider contacting local law enforcement and a digital rights organization (like the Cyber Civil Rights Initiative or PEN America Online Harassment Field Manual) for next steps.

4. Establish ground rules with family

Discuss safety boundaries with household members. This conversation can feel awkward, but clarity reduces fear and confusion later.

- Decide who will handle unexpected calls or deliveries.
- Agree on how to respond to strangers asking about you.
- Create a simple “what to do if…” plan for different scenarios – e.g., receiving a threatening message, seeing a suspicious post, or being followed online.

5. Prepare emotional ground support

Engage your support system early, before you need them. Let people know how they can help: listening without judgment, distracting conversation, a walk, a meal together, or help managing notifications.

If you have access to therapy, coaching, or clergy, let them know this kind of stress may arise and keep a standing check-in.

6. Engage community and professional resources

Reach out to peers who’ve been through similar experiences. Sharing coping strategies and emotional space normalizes these challenges and helps everyone feel less alone. There are also services that can advise on documentation, digital security, and emotional recovery without requiring a formal workplace report. Consider connecting with:

- PEN America
- Freedom of the Press Foundation
- Mental health and trauma supports, such as the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, local crisis centers, or professional associations offering confidential counseling.
- Legal aid or digital rights groups if harassment escalates to impersonation, doxxing, or stalking. Examples include the [Cyber Civil Rights Initiative](#), [Civilination](#), [Minc Law Right to Be](#), [HONR Network](#).



How to build your safety and support plan

Below are some starter prompts that help outline a support plan that fits your needs. From the content in this section, select additional questions that fit your context.

- Who are the trusted contacts I can reach out to (supervisor, HR, security, peers, family, friends)?
- What personal information about me is public that I may want to remove?
- Where are my organization’s digital and physical vulnerabilities?
- Where are my personal digital and physical vulnerabilities?
- What steps can I take today to strengthen security (e.g., password updates, social media privacy review)?
- What supports will I use if harassment occurs (colleagues, family, mental health resources, crisis lines, union or professional associations)?

Even a short written plan can make a difference. It provides agency in moments of crisis and helps teams respond quickly, collectively, and compassionately.

Step 3: Know what to do if you become a target

If you become a target of hateful messages, threatening calls, misinformation campaigns and similar activities, the following steps – adapted from trauma-informed resources in journalism – can help you protect your safety and well-being.

1. Keep evidence.

Save threatening or offensive messages, emails, or comments. Screenshots and timestamps can be important later for internal reports or law enforcement if necessary.

2. Strengthen your digital security.

Immediately block and report harassers on your personal channels. Review your privacy settings, update passwords (avoid reusing them), and enable two-factor authentication on all major accounts. Remove personal contact information – such as home addresses or personal phone numbers – from public profiles when possible. There are also [services](#), such as Delete.me, EasyOptOuts, and Incogni, that can scrub personal information that has been collected and published by data brokers, but doing the work yourself may be more [effective](#).

3. Inform your supervisor or designated contact.

Tell a trusted leader that you are being targeted. Supervisors should be prepared to activate safety protocols, provide backup on communications, and help manage public responses.

4. Protect your mental health.

The emotional impact of harassment can be significant. As needed, mute notifications, log off temporarily, or delegate social media monitoring. The intensity of hate campaigns usually decreases after a few days. Remember that the attacks are not personal, even when they feel that way. Trolls are often testing boundaries, not truth.

5. Support others.

If a colleague is targeted, check in. Ask what would be helpful – listening, taking over an inbox shift, or simply validating that what's happening matters. Avoid minimizing online attacks; they can have real-world consequences for safety, reputation, and mental health.

6. Reflect and learn.

After any incident, take time as a team to reflect: What worked? What could be improved next time? Updating internal protocols builds collective resilience.

#4

Build community: Foster trauma-informed practices in the workplace

There is a lot each of us can do to foster a culture where our teams feel safe, supported, and empowered to show up as whole human beings.

Trauma-informed workplaces are built on five core principles: safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, peer support, and empowerment. This section features practical ways to put those principles into action from wherever you sit.

1. Foster psychological safety in everyday interactions

Everyone needs to feel safe to speak up, make mistakes, or admit when something is hard.

- Model honesty by naming when you're stressed or unsure – it gives others permission to be real.
- Start meetings with a moment of grounding: a deep breath, a stretch, or a check-in question ("What's one word for how you're arriving today?").
- If you notice tension, acknowledge it gently instead of ignoring it. Transparency lowers collective anxiety.
- Encourage curiosity over criticism – replace "Who missed this?" with "What made this difficult?"

2. Strengthen connection and peer support

We are more resilient together than we are alone.

- Make time for small talk and humor – it builds trust and ease.
- Check in privately if a colleague seems withdrawn or overwhelmed. Even one sincere "How are you holding up?" can matter.
- If your department doesn't have a formal peer-support program, suggest one or create peer-support or buddy systems within your team. Pairing new or isolated colleagues with someone experienced builds belonging.
- Normalize conversations about well-being: "I'm taking a walk after this – want to come?"

IN THIS SECTION

- » Foster psychological safety in everyday interactions
- » Strengthen connection and peer support
- » Communicate with care and clarity
- » Build fairness and boundaries into team norms
- » Practice collective reflection and learning
- » Notice and support each other after difficult moments
- » Build microcultures of trust
- » Model recovery and self-care

3. Communicate with care and clarity

Information gaps fuel stress. When things are uncertain — budgets, staffing, leadership changes — share what you know, even if it's just: "Here's what's being discussed and when we'll have more answers."

If you are a manager:

- Be transparent about what you can and can't control.
- Avoid overpromising; people feel safer when expectations are realistic.
- Invite feedback and input before decisions are made, not after.

If you are a team member:

- Ask for clarification rather than making assumptions.
- Repeat information up and down the chain — it helps keep everyone aligned.

4. Build fairness and boundaries into team norms

Burnout is often about systems that reward overextension. Boundaries, then, are especially effective when they are collective, not just personal — they keep the whole team functional.

Consider these tips:

- Speak up for realistic deadlines and balanced workloads.
- Encourage "right-sizing" projects: What truly needs excellence, and what simply needs completion?
- Support coworkers who take time off or set boundaries; don't glorify overwork.
- Middle managers can model this by respecting after-hours boundaries and encouraging time for recovery after high-intensity periods.

5. Practice collective reflection and learning

After stressful events — like an intense communications cycle, a negative media story, or community backlash — build in time for reflection.

- Ask: What worked? What was hard? What support would help next time?
- Celebrate wins, but also name what felt heavy or confusing.
- Make it safe to share mistakes as learning opportunities.
- Rotate who facilitates these conversations to distribute ownership and build capacity across the team.



Public health leadership spotlight: San Antonio Metropolitan Health District

Patricia Kittle, Metro Health's workforce development administrator, conducted surveys with a team of ~200 supervisors and managers in the City of San Antonio, Texas Metropolitan Health District to understand:

- Their work
- Their training opportunities
- Their plans to stay in their jobs over the next year

The internal surveys showed that the staff feels consistently supported and engaged. Kittle credits much of Metro Health's morale to its culture of compassion, which consists of small moments of support, employee appreciation, and recognition. Recently, the department got permission from city officials to close the office for "Metro Health Day," a time for employees to rest and have fun with colleagues.

- Note that these sessions should be focused on practical takeaways rather than emotional processing. A full-group debrief of frustrations or negative emotions can unintentionally add to the collective strain, so consider offering separate spaces for individual support when needed.

6. Notice and support each other after difficult moments

When a colleague experiences harassment, illness, or loss, your response matters. Small gestures — thank you notes, flexible scheduling, sharing food — restore trust and belonging faster than formal statements can.

- Reach out first. Don't assume someone else will.
- Offer specific help: "Can I take your next monitoring shift?" or "Would it help if I joined your next meeting?"
- Validate that what they're feeling is normal; avoid minimizing it by saying "Don't take it personally."
- Follow up later — support is not a one-time act.

7. Model recovery and self-care

Everyone watches how we handle stress. Visibly protecting your own limits and advocating for staff recovery can help shift culture from crisis to care.

- Normalize taking breaks, lunch away from screens, and stepping outside.
- Acknowledge when you need to slow down — it gives permission for others to do the same.
- Celebrate colleagues who prioritize well-being, not just productivity.

8. Build micro-cultures of trust

Even in large or unstable organizations, small groups can embody trauma-informed principles. Your team, workgroup, or department can become a "pocket of resilience."

- Keep agreements visible and revisit them often (e.g., how we communicate, how we make decisions).
- Recognize each other's strengths and contributions regularly.
- Use inclusive language and practices so everyone feels seen.

When possible, connect across departments — shared understanding reduces silos and misunderstandings.

More resources

Much of this advice builds on great resources already developed by the Freedom of the Press Foundation, Peer Support Canada, the former Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, and other organizations and resources. Learn more through the following resources.

- [Support for Mental Health Conditions](#) (National Institute of Mental Health)
- [Mental Health America Online Self-Assessments](#) (Mental Health America)
- [Caring for Your Mind Only Makes You Stronger](#) (Huntsman Mental Health Institute and the Ad Council)
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) (988 Lifeline)
- [Disaster Distress Helpline](#) (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)
- [A journalist's guide to digital security risk assessment](#) (Freedom of the Press Foundation)
- [The effectiveness of interventions to improve resilience among health professionals: A systematic review](#) (Nurse Education Today)
- [Psychological First Aid Training: A Scoping Review of Its Application, Outcomes and Implementation](#) (International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health)
- [Online Harassment Field Manual](#) (PEN America)



About Information Futures Lab (IFL)

Brown University's Information Futures Lab is an interdisciplinary space for civic society leaders, journalists, public officials, researchers, and other creators and sources of trusted information. Together, we respond to the ongoing information crisis as a civic and public health threat.

Amidst rapid technological and societal change, we collaborate to create an evidence base and improve health information ecosystems. Our vision is a future where people can effectively access, create, and make sense of information that is crucial to their well-being.

[Information Futures Lab | Where ideas and evidence meet policy and practice](#)



About Public Health Communications Collaborative (PHCC)

The Public Health Communications Collaborative is a learning and information hub for professionals who communicate about public health. Through relevant, timely, and practical communications tools and learning opportunities, we advance a public health system where everyone has what they need to make informed decisions about their health.

We create and amplify practical resources, messaging, and learning opportunities for public health communicators designed to address public health issues, build public confidence, and identify and counter misinformation. Our practical resources and training tools are directly informed by public health communicators on the front lines of their communities and designed to address their evolving needs. We develop answers to tough public health questions, misinformation alerts, shareable graphics, social messaging, plain language resources, and other communication tools.

[Public Health Communications Collaborative: Your Resource For Better Health Communication & Messaging.](#)