



# SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE WAKE OF VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA

Episodes of violence and trauma in young people's communities, especially those that arise from a place of systemic inequality, prejudice and racism, impact young people's lives in a variety of ways. Mentors are uniquely positioned to help young people process these experiences by providing a space to express their emotions, ask for help, and channel uncertain feelings into positive, constructive action. However, mentors may need strategies for supporting these discussions and actions as well as support for being allies to young people trying to make sense of their feelings. For example, in the aftermath of tragic incidents of racial profiling and violence resulting from police actions, young people may feel unsafe, angry, frustrated, sad, and powerless. This guide was developed to help mentors build relationships with young people that affirm their experiences and cultivate a sense of safety after incidents of violence or traumatic events occur.

Additionally, we encourage mentors to convene with their networks and affiliated organizations to discuss these recommendations and apply them to the unique experiences of the communities and young people they serve, and we emphasize the importance of collaboration between youth-serving groups and organizations to facilitate affirming, healing and supportive conversations with young people about violence they have experienced or encountered, and their reactions to these tragic events.

## PREPARE: CONTEXT AND ROLES

**Define your role.** Consider what it means to be an ally to young people as they navigate these challenges. Whether or not you and your mentee have similar backgrounds or experiences, your role is to respect and affirm their experiences, help them process their feelings, and consider what actions they can take that will support them and their communities.

**Do your homework.** Take time to learn about the factors that impact the overall wellness of the young people you mentor and their communities, including acute losses or traumatic events, as well as more chronic and pervasive challenges like food injustice and homelessness. Consider how your mentee might perceive these issues and what his/her perspective might be. Talk with other adults and seek professional perspectives on how these issues might impact your mentee, what a supportive conversation with your mentee about these topics might look like, and what kind of additional supports are available to your mentee.

**Know yourself.** It is important to consider that conversations about race, privilege, and violence may be more harmful than beneficial to young people if you are not able to effectively affirm, attend to, and support young people in expressing their feelings. Often, mentors find these conversations personally challenging. It is important to explore your own biases, emotional triggers, and limitations before entering into a conversation with a young person about a challenging topic. Creating a plan to manage your feelings so you can effectively support your mentee is a key step, and should be part of an ongoing reflection process for mentors.

- For further discussion and practice around exploring bias in particular, view the MENTOR and My Brother's Keeper Alliance webinar series, including [Module 1: Knowing Thyself – Must Know Me to Build an Effective We](#) and [Module 2: Getting to Know You – Let Me Meet You Where You Are](#).
- For further resources on poverty and its impact on communities and youth, review the content on the Poverty USA website: <http://www.povertyusa.org/>
- For a full overview of mentoring for LGBTQ youth, visit the National Mentoring Resource Center, and read the evidence review on [Mentoring for Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex, Gender Nonconforming Youth](#)

## COMMUNICATE: STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONS

**Acknowledge what's going on.** Conversations about violence impacting communities, as well as underlying societal factors including racism, prejudice and privilege, can help to acknowledge, affirm and explore the experiences of many young people. These conversations can help young people make sense of their experiences and systems of injustice that may have impacted their families and communities, and receive support from caring adults who are invested in their safety, wellness, and success.

**Understand and cultivate critical consciousness in your mentoring relationship.** A critical approach to mentoring focuses on creating opportunities for youth to reflect on, talk about, and challenge systems of inequity, such that the mentoring

relationship becomes a vehicle for young people's exploration of race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., and the impacts of discrimination and/or privilege on their lives.

- For more information about critical mentoring, read the [Guide to Mentoring Boys and Young Men of Color](#), and [Critical Mentoring: A Definition and Agenda](#).

**Begin the conversation.** The first conversations about these topics are often the most difficult. Talking about what your mentee reads, hears, and notices is often a less threatening starting point. If you feel it is appropriate, ask your mentee what he or she thinks about events in the news. This may be a helpful way to understand your mentee's feelings and perspective. If your mentee is interested in more deeply exploring the systemic and historical factors that contribute to some forms of violence, consider reading a book about inequality or social justice together. For example, this [#BlackLivesMatter book list for teens](#) supports teens in learning more about race and justice. As you discuss these materials and current events with your mentee, you may find opportunities to describe your own emotional reactions in ways that may help to shed light on what your mentee may be feeling. Offering your own reactions without judgement can model healthy self-expression for your mentee, and can help young people make sense of situations that may be complex or difficult to understand at first. Be sure to use this type of self-disclosure with intentionality and care, so as not to overpower or dismiss your mentee's own reactions. Ask thoughtful questions that encourage your mentee to consider multiple viewpoints and reflect on his or her assumptions.

- Check out [Teaching Tolerance](#), a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, for more activities and conversation-starters on the topics of equity, diversity, and justice. For conversations about gender, [Gender Spectrum](#) offers tools, resources, and how-to guides that can help mentors create inclusive and affirming spaces for youth.

## SUPPORT: ACKNOWLEDGE COMPLEX EMOTIONAL REACTIONS AND OFFER HELP

**Avoid harmful messages.** If a young person discusses with you an experience they or someone they know has had with violence or abuse, it is critical that you avoid conveying any message suggesting that the victim of the violence is somehow responsible. For example, suggesting that the victim of an incident of violence related to racial profiling or sexual assault is to somehow to blame for what happened to them has harmful emotional impacts as well as destructive social consequences. Instead, focus on conveying concern about what happened and what your mentee may be feeling.

**Understand the range of emotional reactions young people may have, and the different ways that these feelings may be expressed.** Different people may have different degrees of anger, frustration and sadness in the wake of violence, and these feelings will be expressed in a variety of ways, from becoming quiet and turning inward, to voicing feelings openly. Young people may not know how to express themselves in ways that communicate their feelings clearly. Some young people may feel such intense anger that their feelings are expressed in a threatening way, which may reflect the intensity of their anger but not their intentions. Establish guidelines and parameters to facilitate difficult conversations and to express opposing viewpoints respectfully<sup>1</sup>. Expect and be prepared to respond supportively and appropriately to a variety of emotional expressions in young people.

**Ask questions about “safety.”** Frequent exposure to danger and the sense that one’s physical safety is at risk can contribute to a young person’s perception of the world as an unsafe place. Create a space for discussions about the emotional impact of living with fear; ask questions about the places, situations and people with whom your mentee feels safe or unsafe. Encourage young people to resources, such as a library, after-school program, youth group, or a community center where they can take a respite from their surroundings and cultivate a sense of safety.

**Give it time.** Young people who have experienced exposure to violence and traumatic events or have frequent, negative experiences with adult authority figures may need extra time to form trusting relationships. Initially, a mentee may exhibit hesitancy or doubt about establishing a connection with a mentor. They may “test” the relationship to see if you will let them down or abandon them as other adults may have done. Recognize these behaviors as mechanisms for coping and survival, versus viewing them as a form of hostility, rejection

## KEY RESOURCES FOR MENTORS

**The National Center for Victims of Crime** provides information about community resources for survivors of a crime or other traumatic events.  
<https://victimsofcrime.org>

**The National Suicide Prevention Hotline** provides immediate support, information and resources for those experiencing emotional distress or suicidal crisis.  
1-800-273-8255  
<http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

**National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline** offers information, support and resources for teens in abusive relationships.  
[www.loveisrespect.org](http://www.loveisrespect.org)  
866-331-9474

**The Trevor Project** is a suicide hotline for gay and questioning youth.  
<http://www.thetrevorproject.org>  
866-488-7386

**The National Alliance on Mental Illness** provides education, advocacy, resources and support for individuals with mental illness and their loved ones.  
<https://www.nami.org>  
NAMI Helpline: 1-800-950-NAMI (6264)

or “acting-out.” Whenever possible, give your mentee options. Ask their opinions and offer choices, to counteract their experience of events that are out of their control. If in doubt, ask your mentee, “In what ways can I be most helpful or supportive at this time?” At the start, keep the conversations light, and encourage sharing at a pace that feels safe and comfortable. Young people may withdraw if they are afraid that they have shared too much about themselves early in the relationship, because this may leave them feeling exposed. The initial process of engagement will require time and patience.

**Commit to self-care.** Mentors and mentees are both bombarded with disturbing images and stories in the media, and these messages can take a significant emotional toll. Repeated exposure can trigger past traumatic memories or contribute to the experience of vicarious trauma. Acknowledge, for yourself and your mentee, that it is okay and healthy to take a break from these discussions and focus on other things as a way of taking care of ourselves. If you are working within a structured group, consider incorporating an activity like “Clearing the Space”<sup>ii</sup> to help guide young people in letting go of negative emotions and caring for themselves. Encourage mentees to think about long-term strategies for self-care to prepare for other stressors or challenges they may face in their lives.

**Advocate when necessary.** Sometimes, young people aren’t able to cope with the emotional distress they face as a result of violence or trauma, and need more support than you can provide as a mentor. If your mentee is struggling with an emotional or mental health concern that is preventing him or her from focusing on schoolwork or engaging in healthy relationships, advocate<sup>iii</sup> for your mentee to receive the additional help, whether this is more support in school, or a referral for mental health care. Be sure to recognize and support the key role of your mentee’s parent or guardian and partner with them to promote your mentee’s access to resources he or she may need. Be aware of local resources that may provide additional support, information, and referrals for mentees and their families for the specific challenges they face, including local youth resource centers, community agencies, mental health centers, and hotlines. Survivors of a crime or other traumatic events can find local community resources by visiting the National Center for Victims of Crime at <https://victimsofcrime.org>. Mentees who are experiencing emotional distress or a suicidal crisis can receive immediate support, information and resources by calling the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 or by visiting its webpage at <http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>.

## **BUILD COMMUNITY: CREATE CONNECTIONS FOR GREATER IMPACT**

**Deepen your support and impact** by bringing people together, including other mentors, mentoring program coordinators, young professionals groups, advocacy

groups, and faith-based groups, to discuss the issues impacting young people and their communities.

**Engage with organizations that are experienced and equipped to facilitate safe, healing, and productive conversations about violence, race, and injustice.**

Connect with mental health agencies or clinicians who understand the mental and emotional impacts of violence and oppression as well as the clinical needs of young people, to support mentees and their families, as well as mentors and other community members, in processing their feelings with professional support in place.

**Empower young people to set the agenda for a community conversation.**

Work with young people, other mentors, clinicians, and community partners to plan group discussions that provide a safe space for the expression of feelings, the processing of experiences, the sharing of support and empathy, the building of community, and the consideration of constructive solutions. Work together to develop key questions that young people and their mentors can discuss and brainstorm together, as well as guidelines and parameters for the conversation. If relevant, talk with young people and other adults about whether it makes sense to involve law enforcement partners in the conversation, and if so, seek out allies in law enforcement whose goals align with those of young people. Ensure that young people and their families know how to access additional supports and resources that they may need when the discussion concludes.

- Engage young people in an exploration of how to [facilitate group discussions](#) and [analyze problems and goals](#) with these Community Toolbox Toolkits, and be sure to include young people as you determine the goals and expectations for this conversation. [Organizing for Power, Organizing for Change](#) offers a wealth of activities and guides to help youth and adults alike frame these conversations.

<sup>i</sup> Sample ground rules and other important considerations for setting the stage for effective group conversations with youth about difficult topics can be found on page 36-38 of Perschy's [Helping Teens Work Through Grief, 2nd Ed.](#) Additional examples of ground rules and strategies for effectively leading group discussions are offered in the Community Toolbox's chapter on [Techniques for Leading Group Discussions](#)

<sup>ii</sup> This activity is described on pages 54-55 of Perschy's [Helping Teens Work Through Grief, 2nd Ed.](#)

<sup>iii</sup> You can read more about the practice of mentor advocacy by reading the National Mentoring Resource Center [evidence review](#) of this mentoring practice and related [insights](#) for practitioners.

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