

Grief Leadership Recovery and Renewal After Wildfire:

A Place to Process for Educators, School Mental Health
Providers, and Youth / Young Adult Leaders and Allies

A learning summary



Introduction

From Lahaina and outward, the waves of impact and layers of grief will continue to reverberate for weeks, months, and years after the August 2023 wildfires. In addition to those immediately impacted, the fires in Lahaina surfaced ecological grief and climate anxiety for those watching. It surfaced vicarious trauma and grief for those connected to Lahaina while living in the diaspora and on the mainland. It caused activation for those who have previously experienced devastating wildfires in California and beyond.

In times of crisis, coming together to make meaning of what we are each holding helps us show up for ourselves and each other professionally.

On September 14th, 2023, over 60 of us gathered to explore grief leadership and to create space for providers to process the recent wildfires in Lahaina, HI, and explore how those devastating fires affected people far beyond Maui. This session was a collaboration of the [School Crisis Recovery & Renewal project](#) (a National Child Traumatic Stress Network Category II site) and the youth and young adult specialty program of the [Pacific Southwest Mental Health Technology Transfer Center](#) (whose regional support extends to the U.S. Pacific Islands, Hawaii, California, Arizona, and Nevada).

Our time together was designed to gather school crisis leaders, youth and young adult providers, and peer support professionals to explore how the Lahaina fires were experienced across multiple communities and to identify ways to better support the children, youth, and young adults we serve.

After rich discussions and collective learning and resourcing, we offer the following summary to steer our grief leadership now and, in the weeks, months, and years to come.

An Invitation for Self-Reflection and Grounding

At the beginning of our gathering, we invited participants to take a moment to self-reflect and ground (an essential leadership move). We asked:

» ***What is coming up for us as leaders of school communities, systems, and allies of youth and young adults in the context of climate disaster, wildfire, and collective and vicarious grief?*** We explored how hard it is to lead in the aftermath of wildfire, especially when leaders themselves are experiencing personal loss amidst professional responsibilities. We heard and held that many of you are feeling overwhelmed with leadership roles that go above and beyond what you are trained and prepared for.

» ***What fears do we hold?*** We shared our fears of past pain resurfacing, the pain of the present, and fear of a future in which this crisis affects families for decades to come. Collectively, there's a deep desire to meet people's basic needs and a lack of trust that current systems can do so. We see a broken system where the cost of living continues to rise even while many have lost everything. We fear that burnout will occur before the broken system is changed.

» ***What hopes do we hold?*** We shared hopes that include having courage and finding common ground. We hope for connection by reconnection with land and health. We enact these hopes by showing up in community, building new partnerships, and bringing resources to the caregivers and rebuilders of Maui.

We invite you to return to your hopes and your fears in leading through challenge and chaos. Being honest with where we are and where we need support can help us model courageous vulnerability for the young people we serve.

We also offered this teaching from Lama Rod Owens that speaks to the power of being witnessed in community:

"Healing does not happen in isolation. Our culture over-prioritizes the self with the expectation that you will meet all your needs on your own, and if you don't, then it is a personal failure.

However, true healing does not happen alone. Even when a meditation practice may outwardly seem like a solitary practice, we are practicing connection— to our breath, to the earth, to our ancestors and guides, and to each other.

We are practicing coming home, to ourselves and to each other. Healing happens when we are able to pause and check in with what's present internally, giving love and kindness to the woundedness we carry.

And, healing happens when that vulnerability is witnessed by the community."

Voices of Experience in our Community: Leading Grief Recovery & Renewal

Our session featured guest speakers on **Native Hawaiian grief, educator wellness post-wildfire, and climate resilience and youth-led movements**. Following those speakers' presentations, participants engaged in breakout sessions on those three topics, as well as **Supporting Youth and Young Adult Grief Recovery and Grieving from Afar: Vicarious Grief and Trauma**.

1 // Native Hawaiian Grief Work

Writer, cultural practitioner, and historian Adam Keawe Manalo-Camp shared concepts regarding Native Hawaiian grief. He framed grieving as a process that includes recovery and renewal phases and is held and shared within the community. He opened with an offering of Pule Ho'ola 'Aina, a prayer for the healing of the earth.

Manolo-Camp named four periods of Native Hawaiian grief:

- **Numbness:** dealing with the shock and disbelief that the event has occurred.
- **Adaption:** processing feelings related to the loss which may manifest differently for different people, each of whom may have their own trauma response.
- **Recovery:** dealing with survivor guilt and adjusting to the loss or crisis experienced.
- **Reorganization:** transitioning to life post crisis. Here a person might engage in **Mahiki**, a process of shedding away grief to mourn and express feelings individually or as a group, which creates an opportunity to better understand those feelings and work toward reorganization.

“For [Native Hawaiians], there is no shame in grieving or asking for support and they recognize, without judgment, that grief looks different for everyone.”

In the breakout session he hosted, Manolo-Camp uplifted the many ways Native Hawaiians might express their grief, including:

- **Talking prayer:** continuing to converse with those lost.
- **Believing in *Ho’ailona*:** or believing in signs that, when recognized, allow memories of those lost to become healing opportunities.
- **Composing *Kanikau or Mele*:** writing songs or chants to vocalize feelings.
- **Expressing anger:** about the person, loss, or crisis; Mahiki can include processing anger.
- **Seeking outside supports:** though stigma around seeking mental health supports still exists, there are many ways to seek outside support beyond formal mental health services. Manolo-Camp noted that *“when our Ancestors needed to talk to someone, they talked to an elder or Kupuna (Native Hawaiian priests) and they had a whole Kupuna order who were experts in dealing with grief.”*

Grief Work as Community Work

In addition to exploring the four periods of grief, Manolo-Camp also offered the concept of **“Grief Work,”** as coined by [Mary Kawena Pukui](#). Grief work is both a shared experience and an enactment of Native Hawaiian traditions within a community.

Grief work spans from comfort for the mourners and serving the deceased’s favorite food to recalling the individual’s life. The community’s role is to support those grieving. The community will often support with the funeral, burial, and quiet companionship.

Though individual mourning may occur, it can come in the form of chants, which are still shared with the community. The support will continue a year after a loss, when there is a **“*Aha’aina waimaka*,”** or informal feast, to reaffirm communal and family land ties and mark the full transition from the first three mourning periods into the reorganization period.

Manolo-Camp, later in the breakouts, emphasized that *“in Hawaiian culture, mourners are not expected to do hard work or even work. They are expected to be able to just be in that healing space,”* a wish he also held for the Lahaina community as they returned to their work and schools.

Key Takeaways for Mental Health Practitioners & School Leaders Supporting Young Adults

*** Grieving Alone and Grieving Together:** Grief and grieving is both an individual and communal process. One way to support this is to look at recovery and renewal frameworks, or frameworks like the four periods of Native Hawaiian grief, as a way through the immediacy after a crisis into recovery and renewal.

*** Meet Grievers Where They Are:** Manolo-Camp cautioned against going *“into grief counseling (or other support) with an agenda.”* Borrowing from some of the learnings around “Grief Work,”

supporting grief and griever can look like many things; perhaps one of the most accessible and simplified ways is to sit and be present with the griever. Allow them to guide when and how they wish to talk about their loss, as all people grieve differently.

*** Care for the Caregivers:** As mental health professionals and school leaders, it is important to be mindful of our own needs. Manolo-Camp noted that when *kahuna (priests)* supported *Mahiki* processes, they often went into the ocean and decompressed. In his words: *“take time to decompress because you need it just as much as the mourners. When you’re in that space, you’re sharing the mourning with that person and that weighs on you.”*

Extended Learning Resources

- Adam Keawe Manalo-Camp’s link tree: <https://linktr.ee/adamkeawe>
- On Grief Work:
 - https://www.psychologytools.com/assets/files/Grief_work_Blatner.pdf
 - <https://onipaa.org/kaumaha-helu-ekahi> + <https://onipaa.org/kaumaha-helu-elua>
- Podcast: The Red Nation Podcast episode *“Healing Maui w/ Noelani Ahia”* - (YouTube version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQOZsPSHAjw>)

2 // A Love Letter to Lahaina: Witnessing Wildfire from Afar and Offering Peer Support

Seeing wildfire (or other shared crisis experience) can activate vicarious grief and trauma. Scott Lindstrom and Matt Reddam (Butte County Office of Education) shared their lived experiences of grief as educators after the Butte County wildfire five years ago, and acknowledged that while what they each experienced is very different from the wildfires in Hawaii, there are similarities that can inform the way we lead in this moment.

As mental health professionals and community members who were directly impacted by the wildfire in their rural California community, Matt and Scott reflected on how they held both pain and hope for a grieving and traumatized community. Today, they are still learning and practicing by checking in with they work with and supporting one another. While they would not have chosen this path for their community, they acknowledge how the shared experience of wildfire has united the community, leaving it stronger than it was before.

Reddam noted: *“I thought I knew a whole lot about traumatic stress. What I wish I had known is that grief and trauma are very different things... one can be treated, the other is life. When they’re happening at the same time, it’s very hard to distinguish between a grieving community and a traumatized community.”*

Community Vulnerability as Wellness

Many crisis responders are tasked with showing up for others professionally while experiencing the same crisis personally. Lindstrom and Reddam shared the challenge of responding as school crisis leaders who were also grieving their own losses. They shared reflections on their vulnerability and the

challenges of holding space. As Manolo-Camp noted regarding Native Hawaiian grief, Lindstrom also remarked that a big piece of their process in Butte was “*creating space and being able to just be present with whatever it is that unfolds.*”

They shared that what worked for them was to embrace and share their vulnerability with their community. Holding space to be present for everyone’s unique experience can be healing and it provides space to make meaning out of pain.

By intentionally creating spaces like this, those in Butte developed a more intimate community. Lindstrom noted:

“Vulnerability is a gift we are given in the presence of others, and it’s a gift to others when we share ours with them as well. It makes it an equitable relationship instead of a kind of superior relationship. In the community, this is a gift that I feel very confident will come out of [crisis].”

Key Takeaways for Mental Health Practitioners & School Leaders Supporting Young Adults

- * Roles in Schools:** It is critical to identify what roles different educators and staff members will carry, name each unique task, and determine which tasks will be shared. School staff are often the real first responders to critical events and need their own spaces to be present and process.
- * Creating Accountability and Predictable Check-In Opportunities:** Creating role clarity allows all those involved to consider how and when they show up for the community. It can create spaces to build both accountability and check-in opportunities during stressful times. Additionally, role clarity can create clear places for school staff to provide support, as well as places and spaces to get support.
- * Walking Alongside School Leadership:** School leadership may feel unsteady in their roles as they attempt to manage all the moving pieces that occur post-crisis. What support providers and other school staff who have capacity can do is to simply show up and walk alongside them as they navigate these times.
- * Focus on the School Administrators:** Administrators need direct outreach, too. Administrators may try to downplay their own trauma and may self-isolate during post-crisis recovery. Administrators may feel incompetent and fearful of saying or doing the wrong thing in moments for which they are not prepared. School systems leaders (county, department of education) can support administrators by modeling small but impactful moves that reflect grief leadership. If we give staff confidence around their competence, they will allow themselves to be vulnerable and accept help.
- * Defining Wellness:** Post crisis, wellness must be supported not just as a one-time activity, but a process of exploring systemic harms. As crisis responders, we must ensure we are not responding in ways that creates or perpetuates more harm.
- * Maintaining Perspective:** Members of your community will be in deep need, and you will need to balance giving them space to process while attempting to help them access resources. We invite you to remember that this is a process; not everything can happen right now. Like Manolo-Camp noted, Reddam and Lindstrom agreed that there will be time to process and heal, and there will be time to support immediate needs.

✳ **Take Care of Staff More Than Ever Before:** Take care of the teachers, bus drivers, aids, and food service folks. They are the first responders too. Supporting them is critical; the best support is to not wonder if they need help but to give them opportunities for presence, support, and connection.

Extended Learning Resources

- Recording of the [2020 Town Hall On Leading Our School Systems & Communities Through and After Wildfire](#) (10/5/2020), including Matt Reddam from the Pacific Southwest and Northwest MHTTCs
- [Our Right to Grieve: Grief-Informed Recommendations and Resources for Healing-Centered & Racially-Just School Cultures](#) (School Crisis Recovery & Renewal Project, 2023)

3 // Climate Resilience & Youth-led Movements

Lil Milagro Henriquez, founder of [Mycelium Youth Network](#), shared how we might reimagine climate crises as opportunities for youth-led climate resilience. She shared her lived experience as a young person witnessing Hurricane Katrina. Years later, as a school director during wildfires in the Bay Area (CA), her students were experiencing health concerns from the smoke. Students were feeling scared because school was still happening like normal and the adults weren't talking to them about the wildfire, the toxic chemicals in the air, or climate change. She addressed the youths' need by creating an after-school club where they could talk about climate change and brainstorm how they wanted to solve these issues. This led to her creating the Mycelium Youth Network. Later, in the breakout sessions, Henriquez explored how to engage youth in youth-led climate resilience movements.

Ancestral Histories

Through examining the ways in which we might learn from these ancestors who have already experienced crises and natural disasters, we must also explore our own policies and practices around the earth and climate change. Henriquez noted:

“Our histories and our stories and our ancestors make up so much a part of the work that we do in the world, and how we heal, and how we process grief... how we struggle, and what we look to for resistance and education.”

She suggested that we must begin to deconstruct the notion that:

“...the work that we do in the world is separate and distinct from those histories, because we cannot talk about our current ecological crisis, about the wildfires, about the storms that have been happening, the flooding, without a deep understanding of what got us here, and our closest way to connect to that is through legacy of ancestry and teachings.”

Rooting and grounding ourselves in these teachings also requires us to dream about the future, and to do this Henriquez suggests we incorporate young people, listen to their concerns, and support them. The future is theirs as much as ours.

Youth-Led Movements

During the breakout sessions, Henriquez shared that in her work with Mycelium Youth, she supports young people in taking on climate justice through empowering them to create cultural changes and shifts in how they treat each other, plant and animal life, learning STEM skills, and building resilience for themselves as they explore climate resilience.

“Every great movement in modern history has been created by young people because of their innate sense of justice and commitment to righting what’s wrong. They constantly pull back the layers of our current system and ask, ‘but why?’”

By providing young people something concrete they can do to address their concerns, young people can access support in reckoning with the real-life impacts of climate change and natural disasters.

* Key Takeaways for Mental Health Practitioners & School Leaders Supporting Young Adults

* **Climate Resilience and Ancestral History:** identifying what can be learned from our histories as a means of addressing climate justice is essential. We must engage with and empower young people in these movements.

* **Addressing Youth Climate Fears:** creating space for youth to process and verbalize their concerns about climate change is critical to helping them feel empowered and to building their resilience. Offering space for youth to have the institutional and infrastructural power to transform their schools and work toward climate change solutions helps them regain equilibrium after a crisis.

Extended Learning Resources

- [Climate Resilient Schools | Mycelium Youth Network](#)

4 // Supporting Youth and Young Adult Grief

Young adult grief and crisis support often gets missed or de-prioritized because of gaps in our system of care. In a breakout during the second half of our time together, Oriana Ides, a staff member with SCRR and PSMHTTC, led a discussion around supporting youth and young adult grief.

* Key Takeaways for Mental Health Practitioners & School Leaders Supporting Young Adults

* **Defining Resilience:** When working with youth and young adults, using the term “resilience” can elide the pain or hardship a young person is experiencing. Without exploring the root causes, or the conditions that have put young people in a position of experiencing hardship, we may oversimplify their experiences. But resilience also speaks to the beauty and power of human potential - that in chaos, hardship, and intentional and unintentional pain, we are still able to find wisdom.

* **Navigating Uncertainty Post-Crisis:** Ask students what they want to do now and support them in doing that. Allow them to do the talking and take up space with the adults who support them, perhaps transitioning activities you might do together at a desk into a walk-and-talk opportunity to process what is coming up for them in light of what has happened.

* **Allow Youth and Young Adults to Define What Their Care Looks Like:** A way to show that we care is simply to be there for the youth and let them know they are not being judged. Show them that they are accepted for who they are, no matter what. Being mindful of students' mental and emotional needs and boundaries is an important form of caring.

Extended Learning Resources

- [Areas of Focus | Mental Health Technology Transfer Center \(MHTTC\) Network](#)
- [Grief Support for Young Adults | Dougy Center](#)

5 // Vicarious Trauma & Grief

When we witness communities with whom we have connections go through pain, crisis, and trauma from a distance, we can experience deep vicarious grief and trauma. The final breakout group “Grieving from Afar: Vicarious Grief and Trauma” and was held by our colleague Erin Briley. Erin was born and raised in Wailuku, Maui, and is the School Mental Health Coordinator for the Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network (MHTTC). Living in Colorado and watching her home go through distress, Erin led a conversation about what it feels like to be connected to the crisis but disconnected from the proximity of the pain. This room was designed to explore how people outside the communities directly impacted by wildfires but with deep ties to them can manage vicarious grief and trauma. She shared the feeling of pervasive helplessness and how, in her words, *“memories are attached to places. When places are gone, it feels like the memories are gone too.”*

Key Takeaways for Mental Health Practitioners &

* School Leaders Supporting Young Adults

* **Staff and Students May and Have Connections Beyond Your Immediate Community:** Be attuned to the communities with whom your staff and students may be connected beyond the immediate zone. Many students and staff are emotionally connected to other places and peoples and the events that happen there impact the hurt here. School leaders can locate resources that help children through grief when they can't see or touch the communities they love.

* **Validate Vicarious Grief and Trauma:** Validate the trauma and grief of staff and students grieving from afar and for the people directly impacted. Even though your team members may not be physically impacted, they might be deeply emotionally, financially, and socially impacted by a crisis in a place to which they are intimately connected.

Extended Learning Resources

- [Bereaved in Me: Understanding the Vicarious Grief Experiences Among Helping Professionals During the COVID-19 Pandemic - PMC](#)
- Tips for Managing Your Distress Related to Wildfires: <https://www.apa.org/topics/disasters-response/wildfires-tips>
- <https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org>
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)'s [Coping with Disasters resources](#)
- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network's Wildfire Resources](#)

Closing

In our gathering, we heard that grief leadership in times of crisis is strengthened by attunement to culturally humble grief practices, to structurally caring for the caregivers, and that natural disasters often surface pre-existing inequities that inform the speed, quality, and nature of recovery. We were invited to recognize that everyone grieves differently and that some young people may want active support while others may want to lead support efforts themselves. Meeting ourselves and our communities of people where they are; learning the art of holding space for colleagues, students, and their families; and acknowledging that the ripple effect of an event are important grief leadership moves.

And as Adam noted, the grief work is in our lineages. Mental health professionals and those taking care of others need to be mindful of their own wellness. He reminded us that before and after Kahuna (“wise people”) did Mahiki (a “peeling off grief” or “treating deep troubles”), they went into the ocean to wash away the strain of holding so much pain. *“We often forget to include ourselves in the people who are hurting and the importance of honoring our own feelings and processes,”* Manolo-Camp shared. We need to take time to decompress because anyone leading grief work for and with young people need it just as much as the mourners.

When we opened with naming our hopes and fears, Matt Reddam (Butte County Office of Education) shared: *“I fear that fire has changed me. I hope that the fire has changed me.” Grief leadership is knowing and holding that crisis unearths it all, and our work as providers is coming together to process and be held so that we can hold the processing for the young people we serve.*

The Pacific Southwest MHTTC and School Crisis Recovery & Renewal project thanks the speakers and facilitators of this session: Adam Keawe Manalo-Camp, Matt Reddam, Scott Lindstrom, Lil Milagro Henriquez, and Erin Briley. We also thank the PS MHTTC and SCRR staff who provided event facilitation and contributed to the development of this learning capture: Ida Kostianis, Leora Wolf-Prusan, Miranda March, Niki Magtoto, and Oriana Ides.



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