



Collective healing for systems change: The emerging conversation

Kerry Graham

Collective Change Lab, Australia



What's the potential of collective healing and how could it help us transform systems? We come to this exploratory conversation not as experts, but as people who are seeking to learn and create more understanding together about healing. It's our hope that this emerging conversation will give each of us a new insight, a release of something, courage in places where we need it, or validation of what we already deeply know.

As you read the reflections and experiences shared by people, strong emotions or memories may surface and feel present for you. If this happens, we invite you to stop and create some spaciousness for yourself. Allow yourself to experience those feelings and step back if you need to, while allowing others to do the same.

You could take a series of deep breaths to practice feeling more spacious. You might also tune into your body and observe what thoughts and feelings, emotions, and sensations might be happening.



About Healing Systems

In fall 2023, the Collective Change Lab and The Wellbeing Project co-hosted a series of webinars on trauma healing and systems change. In an effort to spark a broader conversation about trauma healing within the social sector, renown social change leaders shared their perspectives on:

- Why we as a sector need to integrate a trauma-lens into how we see and interpret the “conditions holding problems in place” as well as how we design solutions
- Why it’s important to shift the current focus on individual trauma to a much wider frame that takes intergenerational, collective, and historical trauma into account
- How to integrate collective healing practices into the work of systems change.

Our hope is that social change leaders, trauma experts, and trained and traditional healers can come together to collectively forge a common language and start building trust, relationships, and partnerships to embed collective healing into the work of systems change.

We are truly at the beginning of this emerging conversation, and we wish to acknowledge our sincere and heartfelt gratitude to the many trauma-informed social change leaders and trained and traditional healers whose experiences and wisdom are shared in the following pages.

If the hopes, ideas, and stories shared during the webinars and in these pages resonate with you as a conversation you would like to be a part of, please connect with us. Let’s search for answers together.

Collective Change Lab, February 2024

John Kania

Collective Change Lab, USA



A critical factor that prevents communities and systems from transforming is trauma, and importantly, inattention to healing trauma as a part of collective systems change work. When communities feel stymied in making progress because systems feel stuck, a major source of that stuckness, resistance, blockages, defensiveness, and denial is trauma that exists in the system and is left unresolved and unintegrated.

The converse is also true: to the degree that trauma in the system is resolved and integrated, healing can produce tremendous energy and creativity, bringing regeneration to communities and opening up new and untapped potential. What seems so incredibly difficult for systems and communities to get beyond can become easier.

Yet for the most part, our systems don't recognize how trauma impacts people. As a result, decision-makers in those systems can create trauma and hold people in a space of trauma. If we don't talk about it and acknowledge it, then it's very difficult to bring about change. So we have to talk about it, but most of us feel ill-equipped to do that.

Understanding the different types and layers of trauma, and how they manifest in the organizations and systems we are working to change, is an important starting point for this work.

Gail Christopher

National Collaborative for Health Equity, USA



Systemic change begins with the hearts of the people who have the authority and the power to make changes in the systems they are working in. At the end of the day, systems are simply people and the rules, regulations, laws, and resources that have been designed by those people.

Racism and colonialism and sexism and ableism get in the way of our ability to show up and be fully present for each other. So much of the work organizations are doing in name of anti-poverty and anti-racism has actually been traumatizing for many, leaving them feeling insecure and ashamed and afraid to move forward, and in some cases, paralyzed.

Bringing an understanding of how the body reacts physiologically to perceived threats creates an environment where we can exhale collectively and understand that we are on this journey together as extensions of a human family. When we deepen our understanding of stress, adaptation and trauma - which enables us to connect to our deepest shared humanity - our capacities for compassion, caring, and empathy grow exponentially.

That growth and spaciousness allows us to be honest about systemic barriers that exist. It also makes it possible to invite a felt understanding of our interconnectedness and interdependence, and even love, into our organizations and collaboration. That honesty and sense of interdependence creates an invitation for people to show up without the fear, shame, guilt and fragmentation that comes with trauma.

Creating those kinds of experiences - experiences that engage our true humanity and change hearts and minds, at scale all across our different organizations and systems - is complex and continuous work. When people in positions of authority see this as their primary responsibility, that's when we will get transformative change in this country and around the world.

Allison Wainwright

Family Life, Australia



Every day we're working with the system: the courts, police and social workers in child protection. "The system" is also just people in relationships and broader networks of relationships.

Most of the people who go and work in these systems really want to make a change. Yet there's often poor relational health in that system. Those individual people are often incredibly traumatised themselves. They're working in an environment that is incredibly hard. They lose empathy and get overwhelmed with everything on their plate.

The presence of shame and poor relational health are two indicators that the system is unhealthy. That means the lack of connective tissue has led to a loss of empathy - our ability to see through another person's eyes and feel their pain.

How can think about systems change differently as restoring relational connections and creating the connective tissue that tangibly improves the relational health of the system?

Katherine Milligan

Collective Change Lab, Switzerland



Why are we talking about trauma in the context of systems change? First and foremost, because systems are not mechanical constructs or faceless institutions. They are made up of the relationships between people in that system.

And what do we know about trauma? Trauma is an active process in our psyches, in our bodies, and in the ways we relate to each other. In particular, it damages our ability to relate to others with compassion and empathy.

As leaders, we need to bring our conscious awareness to our default trauma responses, because leaders have an outsized influence on organizational and system behaviour. If system leaders take decisions in an activated state and act out their trauma responses on others - exhibiting hyper-aggression and controlling behavior, blaming, denial, dehumanisation, or numbness, for example - the systems they have significant influence over can mirror those same patterns.

Second, exploring trauma through a systems lens helps us grapple with complexity and resist the temptation to reduce or isolate a person's trauma responses to a single event or cause. Many individual expressions of trauma are at least partly collective in origin. If we don't acknowledge and address the intergenerational and collective dimensions of trauma, it's essentially like asking people to heal individually from collective wounds.



Celina de Sola

Glasswing International, El Salvador



Trauma lives in systems and in the individuals that provide services within those systems. For years we have worked with young people and communities impacted by violence. We are providing trauma psycho-education training to more than 100,000 teachers, police, and health care workers.

Individuals and organizations might be uncomfortable working with law enforcement and other groups who are perceived as perpetrators of violence and suffering. But over the years we have come to realize that they are also part of a system; one that is burdened by the impacts of trauma and stress.

And they also want to heal. We can't leave people out of the healing process because of how we perceive their role in communities. Every human deserves the opportunity to heal.

Our training starts by helping people understand how trauma affects their body, mind, and behavior. Once they have an 'a-ha' moment about their own trauma responses, then they can see it in others and respond differently, which ends up shifting the relational dynamic. It's important to give people tools to cope with the effects of trauma on an interpersonal level, because that can ripple out and impact the broader education and health care systems they're a part of.

Louise Marra

Unity House, New Zealand



I help people heal from collective, intergenerational, and systemic trauma. The reason I love this work is because it is really about releasing the full human potential, connection, beauty, and love.

We are nature. We live in a natural system that is always trying to harmonize and it's always trying to heal. To use system as a verb, there's a natural way of "systeming" that is so beautiful.

We all system in a certain way, meaning we cohere with the flow of life. But many of us suffer from the disease of disconnection, a distortion to the flow of life. A traumatised flow.

Our systems are very traumatized and traumatizing because they exist outside of that flow. Our systems are built on white superiority, human superiority, fragmentation, competition, and disconnect. We have to be willing to see that - to see how distorted our traumatised systems are and the enormous cost we bear of all of that unresolved trauma.

How do we start to see systeming differently? And how do we reroute ourselves to the flow of life even as we start to restore the flow of life together through our systems?

Types of Trauma

Individual trauma

refers to an invisible unhealed wound caused by an overwhelming event, series of events, or enduring conditions during our lifetime that remains active in our bodies and psyches long after the event or conditions are over.



Intergenerational trauma

occurs when one or more of our ancestors experiences trauma that was not healed before having children and passes it on. The information encoded in our bodies as sensations, emotions, and reactions gets transmitted to the following generations by attachment and relational dynamics in the family, epigenetically, and other mechanisms.



Collective trauma

can be understood as the population-level impacts of a catastrophic event or process that disrupts the basic structures a community or society has created to sustain its way of life. During and after a collectively traumatizing event, the flow of activities is interrupted, resources we normally have access to are unavailable or destroyed, and the result is an experience of fragmentation, isolation, overwhelm, disorientation, dehumanization, and even death. Natural disasters, colonisation, and the holocaust are examples of collective traumas.



Historical trauma

can be collective and intergenerational in nature but refers specifically to intentional harm and oppression committed against a group of people because of their identity, race, religion, caste, etc., and aimed at subjecting them for gain.



Systemic trauma

refers to the unaddressed, leftover impacts of individual, intergenerational, collective, and historical trauma, plus the fresh trauma that is created by harmful present day system structures and relational dynamics.



Manifestations of Trauma

As you read the list of common individual trauma responses, take a moment to reflect on whether you recognise any of them in yourself when you are in an activated state or experience a moment of overwhelm.

Common individual trauma responses:

“Fight” responses: overreacting to minor infractions, unmerciful condemnation of mistakes as character flaws, excessively harsh criticism, controlling behavior, hyper-vigilance, withholding information, chronic unwarranted mistrust

“Flight” responses: confusion and disorganization, not acknowledging an overwhelming reality, downplaying consequences, incoherence between words and action, dissociation

“Freeze” responses: withdrawal, numbness, insensitivity, immobilized will, feeling flat, disconnected, or unable to access emotions

Now consider how those same patterns manifest at larger orders of magnitude in our organizations, communities, and even systems.

Possible manifestations of systemic trauma:

“Fight” responses: Hoarding information and/or using data to stigmatise an entire group of people; shaming and dehumanising an entire group of people as “broken;” treating oversights or mistakes as attempts at abusing the system with no evidence

“Flight” responses: Dismissing past injustices as having no relevance to present day disparities; fragmenting interactions, communications, and policy responses into smaller and smaller parts until it is almost impossible to see and serve the bigger picture.

“Freeze” responses: Norms that reinforce or even laud the “ideal worker” as one who responds to stressful situations by numbing and absencing; lack of communication and cooperation between parts of a system because of unresolved conflict.



Laura Calderon de la Barca

Collective Change Lab, Mexico



Trauma work has the potential to transform who we understand ourselves to be.

As a child I was subjected to bullying and racial taunts that left with me a compressed sense of self as wrong, bad, flawed. As I embarked on a journey of healing from the trauma of colonialism, I realized how profoundly that trauma affected my identity: the sense of shame, the sense of disconnection, how much I saw the world through that lens.

As I healed, my sense of self expanded and my life changed. There is a connection between healing from colonialism and expanding our consciousness and our understanding of who we are as human beings.

I know it is possible because I have experienced it myself.

Mark Yettica Paulson

Collaborate For Impact, Australia



First Peoples often carry the story of our colonial contact and everything since then as personal stories. Systemic colonization and settlement requires a selective, shallow memory. We remember not the whole story, just little snippets of it. We experience dismissal and denial. Sometimes we dissociate: "That wasn't me; that was someone else long ago!"

Our systems are not broken. There is trauma hidden in them. This deliberate inequity and wilful forgetfulness of colonialism is inbuilt in the system. The shallow memory serves as a useful tool to get systems to avoid working on transformation and healing.

First Peoples are afraid to look at their past, because it's too traumatic to look at. In my case, the trauma that my great-grandmother experienced at the hands of the British during the period of First Contact in Australia has impacted me and even impacts how I raise my children.

But as First Peoples, we still carry the stigma of the systemic trauma of colonisation. It's part of us. So we are also saying: 'Actually, I would like to have the trauma of colonisation acknowledged, because I continue to carry it.'

We need to reframe this work and say: it's not about being for one "side" or the other; it's about all of us healing and moving forward together. To do that, we need to embrace the fact that we are part of a global movement. How can we do more, be more, connect more, influence more?

My hope is that we fight together to say: these systems require us to heal.

Melanie Goodchild

Wolf Willow Institute for Systems Learning, Canada



The thing about intergenerational trauma is that those of us who are traumatized continue to traumatize each other through shame. For example, you get shamed about whether you know your traditional culture and language and how well you can speak it; whether you are "too Indigenous" or "not Indigenous enough."

Part of what we need to recognize is that you cannot predict how collective healing is going to happen. One of the most deeply healing experiences for me has been to learn my traditional language in our immersion course, which is beautiful and healing. There are very few places where we can be safe and struggle to name the collective and intergenerational trauma of colonialism and residential schools that we are still living with today.

We share our stories about why we don't speak our native language fluently. There are older people and young adults, young mothers who hold their baby in their arms. We all hear each other's ancestral and direct experiences with settler colonialism and the horrors of residential school, which many of our older participants or their parents directly experienced.

Sometimes, we don't even realize how hurt we feel until we heal, and we say, "Oh, I didn't know I needed this." That's what the immersion language course has been for me. It connects me to how my ancestors made sense of the world and how to think in my ancestral language and cosmology. Until now, I've always just known how to say words, but I've never truly understood the spirit of what those words mean and the spirit of my native language. Now I can feel that spirit and its healing power.

Rana Dajani

We Love Reading, Jordan



How can we decolonize the language around trauma so we can understand the reality of people who are experiencing trauma?

If we don't use words that relate to people's reality, we can't grasp what's really happening. People experiencing trauma need agency and ownership to express themselves in their own words and communicate what healing means to them. We need to listen and hear what people want, what healing means for them, and then support them from behind in the ways that they want to move forward.

As a species we've been around for 200,000 years and we've been through a lot of trauma, and there are so many things we've evolved to deal with it. We thrive and we flourish.

How do we learn from that ancient wisdom of dealing with trauma?

How do we go forward without reinventing the wheel or coming up with intricate programs that cost a lot of money?

Natalia Quinones

Dunna Foundation, Colombia



One of the hardest things to decolonize in systems change work is the Global North notion of rushing and immediacy and time. It is so difficult to slow down and not feel pressured to produce immediate, observable results.

We need to allow for change to emerge in the time it takes to emerge. We need to let go of the belief that we can have immediate results and control the timeframes in which we measure change.

When we release the tension of having to deliver something on time, the system can come together in its own time.

Donna Kerridge

Ora, New Zealand



Tēnā tātou katoa.

Life is traumatic. It's only the degree that varies.

Some of us have forgotten that we are the living faces of our ancestors. All of us. We are all indigenous to somewhere. We can find our way back to healing by reconnecting with our indigeneity, our wisdom traditions, and our connections to the natural world.

I see the world through the teachings of our indigenous ancestors. I have devoted my life's work to upholding ancestral Māori teachings in a safe and respectful way so that we can continue to heal using the tools bequeathed to us by our ancestors. We must ensure those teachings are carried forward for the benefit of future generations.

In my work as a Rongoā Māori healer, I see trauma as a disease born of imbalance or disconnection from either or both of the physical and spiritual realms. When we live in balance, we are well.

Trauma resides in our bones. It manifests itself in a number of ways – as a sense of loneliness, hopelessness, homelessness, disconnection, not knowing where you belong. Each of these filling the pond with pebbles manifested out of disconnection.

The focus on the importance of independence in our modern world rather than our interdependence and interconnected nature can result in a sense of trauma. For every action, there is a reaction. If we are going to heal ourselves, our communities, and the world, we need different pebbles to cast into our collective pond.

Nothing in this world exists in isolation. No matter how clever we are, nothing will truly heal in isolation. We must inspire hope, reconnect, and know our place of belonging.

Allison Wainwright

Family Life, Australia



We've been operating for 53 years in Melbourne with a real focus on attachment and relationships as a way to support families struggling with family violence and other issues. Our journey as an organization has been significant: we went from being trauma-aware to being trauma-sensitive in the programs and ways we work with families. Increasingly, we are becoming trauma-capable and strategic in how we work in the context of trauma.

We're shifting how we engage with families who are experiencing vulnerability because we know that intergenerational trauma does not end at the immediate family. If we extend the same relational wisdom to a person's broader set of relationships beyond their family ties, then of course we see the same trauma responses play out in the community and relational networks they are a part of.

And that just makes common sense. Communities can carry damage or disruption to relational networks the same way families can. Families and communities are both shock providers or shock absorbers. When they function well, they can provide huge support to people. When they don't, they can provide shocks to people.

So how do we move this conversation from individual trauma healing towards creating trauma-capable communities? How can we form a global relational network of trauma-capable communities that provide security and belonging for all community members? We need to learn together how to enhance relational health at the community level.

Louise Marra

Unity House, New Zealand



I honor individual healing. But so much trauma comes through our relationships. Collective healing is so profound because people can come together in a different way. If I go out and talk to people in power, I try and bring them on that journey with me.

We need to move away from fixing broken people and broken systems to creating healthy people and well-being. In some ways, the collective aspect accelerates the healing. We need a collective body to feel collective trauma. It's too much for one body. The group itself becomes the primary resource.

Groups can resource themselves to do this together. It's not new; it's ancient. We have to recover this ancestral wisdom, relearn it, and resource ourselves to heal together.

What is collective healing?

In a systems change context, **collective healing means accessing the power of relationships to heal through an open-hearted process that supports individuals and groups within a system** to:

- Distinguish and repair harm done to them and/or by them to others,
- Transform the destructive energy left behind by the trauma into higher awareness, compassion, and learning, and
- Participate in finding new and more creative ways to thrive and collaborate with others in changing the system's behavior.

Principles for collective healing

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, the set of principles below is a place to start for social change leaders interested in integrating collective healing into their work:

- **Intention:** Setting a joint intention to heal together creates permission to engage in uncomfortable conversations where one is open to being transformed.
- **Safety:** The presence, care and guidance of a spacious facilitator, clear rules of engagement, and coherent practices
- **Collaboration:** Invite participants to shape the work, allowing the possibility of a different configuration of power to be forged
- **Contained openness:** A balance between structured activities and a presence that participants can trust, along with enough uncertainty so that something new can emerge and life can be re-experienced in its sacredness
- **Cultivating acceptance:** Deep listening to meet people where they are at, support the restoration of everyone's humanity, and weave a deeper relatedness between all involved
- **Graceful reception:** Skilful inclusion of unresolved past harms as they surface, so that **something can shift internally and set the conditions for external change** to happen as a result
- **Consistency of connection:** Tracking the embodied experience of all participants to ensure care as feedback during the healing process, and to gauge inner change
- **After-care:** An adequate **follow-up to support the integration process** as it unfolds after the session
- **Reflective loop:** Time set aside for collective meaning-making and harvesting of the take-aways of the experience

Practices for collective healing

- **Inviting and honouring the traditions,** cultural identities, and language(s) of system actors.
- **Embodiment practices** like dancing, singing, group meditation, somatic work, etc. that help people get out of their heads and into their hearts, and deepen the coherence among the group
- **Centering horizontal relational practices** such as healing circles that encourage empathic listening and reduce power imbalances
- **Reconnecting ourselves to nature** and its healing power as a foundational part of the process
- **Stepping into the power of telling and owning our stories** and bearing witness to others' stories
- **Imbuing the process with sacredness through rituals,** e.g. a traditional offering or blessing, reading a sacred text, acknowledging ancestors, sharing traditional legends, etc.

Natalia Quinones

Dunna Foundation, Colombia



After a collective trauma like the conflict we have experienced in Colombia, we lose our sense of connection between the physical, spiritual, emotional, and thinking parts of ourselves. This fragmentation and loss of connection exists on so many levels: between the different parts of ourselves; between us and our neighbours and fellow citizens; between us and mother earth and the land we are on.

That sense of brokenness permeates our social tissue and all of our social systems. Healing from trauma and conflict requires working on restoring a sense of connection across all of those layers simultaneously: within ourselves, among each other, and to the land. We work on restoring connection across all of those layers in our efforts to reintegrate ex-combatants into the same communities where they were perpetrators during the armed conflict.

When trying to shift systems in a post-conflict context, we knew we had to get all system actors in the room in each community where we work. Often for the first time, former adversaries who have not yet processed that collective trauma are sitting together in the same room.

Our facilitators lead restorative healing circles with former combatants, their direct victims, the police and armed forces who were fighting them, and the government. You have to make space for very difficult conversations and for very difficult emotions that need to surface in circle, and guide participants through them.

It's complex work, and there are many tools that we use. The common thread across the methods we use is the importance of deeply listening to each other's stories and sharing extremely personal vulnerabilities. If done well, the deep connection that emerges and what becomes possible after such a profound healing process is beautiful. After all of the violence that happened, ex-combatants and their former victims are now running businesses together.

That is remarkable. That is a ray of hope for all of us.



Tien Ung

Futures Without Violence, USA



If our goal is to unlearn harmful behaviors and liberate people and communities from systemic trauma, then it's critical to center the people who are most impacted in the problem frame and the solution architecture. It's also critical that they have the time to learn, make mistakes, and pivot. So leadership has to be committed to operate differently.

One of the ways we need to operate differently is how we think about time. Time is an incredibly important resource. We all go into projects with ideas about what needs to be accomplished by when, but we can't get stuck on this fixed notion of time.

The collectives we support are working to redesign systems to transform and transcend trauma, rather than just fixing symptoms. They are focused on what healing means to the people who are most impacted.

They have been successful because we adopted a learning mindset about the time this work takes. There are a lot of barriers cooked into the system. Habits of white supremacy are baked in by design. Let's not lie - those habits take time to undo.

Redesigning systems to transform trauma is all about supporting leaders in those communities who have the heart, the will, and the supportive community to do this work.

Melanie Goodchild

Wolf Willow Institute for Systems Learning, Canada



Our elders helped me redefine systems transformation as *Niigani Miinigowiziiwin*, which means "we give these gifts to the future." To everyone who is pursuing systems change and trying to make the world a better place, my message is: you need to persevere. You might fall down and get hurt, but there are helpers who will help you on your way.

Healing ourselves, and therefore healing systems, means asking our collective community - other human beings, our helpers, our spiritual guides, both the seen and the unseen - to guide us in clearing a pathway for the beings of the future.

In the Anishinaabe cosmology, elders and medicine people pass on rituals, teachings, and embodied ceremonies to seek such guidance. All of our ceremonies are deep physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental experiences, because healing is about bringing these four aspects of our beings back into balance. Our elders would interpret trauma healing as restoring balance.

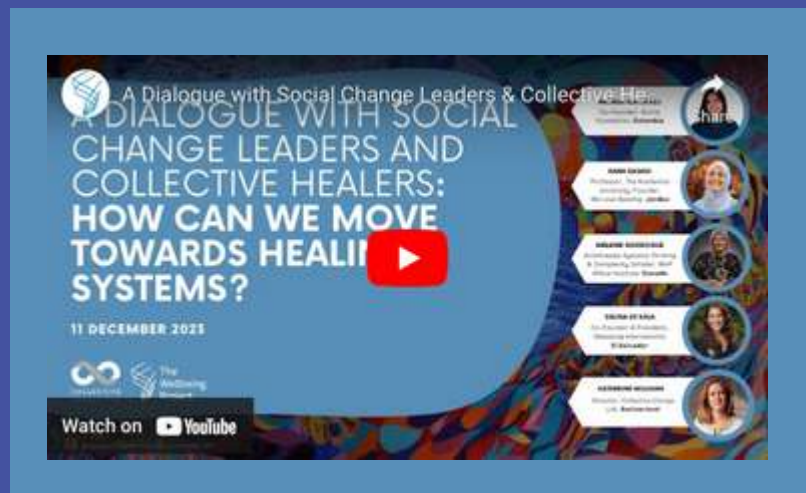
Niigani Miinigowiziiwin: transforming our systems is a gift we give to future generations.

Watch the **three-part webinar series on collective healing** for systems change, in partnership with [The Wellbeing Project](#),

Webinar one shared research findings about individual, intergenerational, and systemic trauma and explored the implications for our ways of working in service of systems change.



Webinar two explored collective healing in a systems change context and shared collective healing principles and practices to integrate into our work as social change leaders.



Webinar three weaved together perspectives from social change leaders and indigenous collective healers across Australia and New Zealand about the potential of collective healing for systems change.

