A practitioner's guide to cultural competency during emergencies

A self-directed learning course for clinicians, therapists, and other providers who treat diverse populations during crises and disasters

Front-line and essential workers play a vital role in protecting and supporting communities during emergencies and disasters. Their work often places them on the front lines, where they face high-risk situations, intense pressure, and increased exposure to trauma. These challenges can have lasting impacts on their mental health and well-being.

To provide meaningful support, it is essential to develop a deeper understanding of their occupational experiences. By applying the core concepts of cultural competency, you can help ensure that front-line workers receive the recognition, respect, and care they deserve as they respond to crises across Canada.

Navigating this course:

- This course is divided into seven main lessons.
- You can take these lessons in order — or focus on the one(s) that seem most relevant to your experience.
- You can listen to the information using our audio player and/or download a PDF to save or print for emergency use.

Contents

1. What is cultural competency and why does it matter?

Learning objectives	Why this matters
- Define cultural competency and its significance in emergency responses. - Identify the four key domains of cultural competency. - Recognize how cultural competency enhances service delivery for diverse communities.	Cultural competency is essential when responding to emergencies. It allows you to provide equitable, effective, and respectful care to diverse populations. By understanding both occupational and cultural factors, you can build trust, improve communication, and enhance outcomes for those you serve.

Cultural competency in times of emergency

Cultural competency is your ability to recognize, understand, and adapt to cultural differences in ways that foster trust, respect, and effective service delivery. It involves developing the knowledge, awareness, and skills needed to engage meaningfully with people from diverse backgrounds.

In emergency settings, cultural competency ensures that you can provide care that is equitable, accessible, and responsive to the needs of different communities. By acknowledging cultural influences on health, communication, and decision–making, you can improve outcomes and strengthen relationships with those you serve.

Occupational cultural competency

Beyond general cultural competency, you also need to understand the occupational cultures of those you serve. Occupational cultural competency builds upon cultural sensitivity — the recognition that cultural factors shape experiences, identities, and

interactions. In emergency settings, this means acknowledging how occupational stressors, traditions, and values influence responders, front-line workers, and their communities.

Key domains of cultural competency

The cultural competency framework consists of four key domains:

Domain	Application
Awareness	Recognizing your own biases, assumptions, and perceptions.
Sensitivity	Acknowledging and valuing the lived and living experiences of others.
Knowledge	Understanding how occupational roles shape risks, access to care, and community needs.
Skills	Applying culturally informed actions that improve engagement and service delivery.

Awareness

Awareness is the first step in developing cultural competency. It requires you to recognize how occupational life influences health, well-being, and access to care.

Building awareness means:

- Recognizing that occupational roles shape the health and well-being of active and previously serving members, their families, and communities.
- Reflecting on your own perceptions, assumptions, and biases about specific occupations and those who work in them.
- Understanding how your perspectives may influence care relationships.
- Engaging in ongoing self-reflection and openness to learning.

Sensitivity

Sensitivity is your ability to emotionally acknowledge the lived and living experiences of those you serve. It involves valuing their perspectives and being motivated to provide culturally informed care.

Practicing sensitivity means:

- Committing to culturally informed care for occupational communities.
- Seeking knowledge to improve the quality of care and services.
- Recognizing how occupational life events impact access to and availability of care.

Knowledge

Knowledge is the external process of understanding occupation-specific risks, experiences, and health concerns.

Developing knowledge means:

- Understanding how occupational demands and stressors shape the lived and living experiences of workers, families, and communities.
- Recognizing how occupational risks affect access to services in civilian systems.
- Being aware of the health risks occupational communities face across the life course.
- Knowing the resources, programs, and support systems available for occupational groups.

Skills

Skills are the actions you take to apply cultural competency in practice. They reflect your ability to engage, adapt, and advocate effectively.

Demonstrating skills means:

- Engaging with others in an empathetic, non-judgmental, and respectful manner.
- Addressing how occupational experiences shape health and well-being.
- Using flexibility, creativity, and support to overcome barriers to care.

- Collaborating with community organizations and service providers.
- Advocating for equitable access to services and support.

2. Understanding health risks for front-line workers

Learning objectives	Why this matters
• Identify key physical and mental health risks faced by front-line workers. • Recognize barriers that prevent front-line workers from accessing care. • Understand the role of cultural competency in addressing health challenges in emergency settings.	Front-line workers play critical roles in emergency response, often putting their own health at risk to protect others. Exposure to physical dangers, psychological stress, and systemic barriers to care can lead to serious long-term health consequences. Understanding these risks helps you to provide better, more informed support to those on the front lines.

Physical health risks

Front-line workers face significant physical challenges due to the demands of their roles.

Risk	Impact
Occupational injuries	Lifting heavy gear, responding to emergencies, and navigating unpredictable environments increase the risk of strains, sprains, fractures, and chronic musculoskeletal issues.
Exposure to hazardous materials	Firefighters and paramedics face exposure to smoke, chemicals, bloodborne pathogens, and infectious diseases, increasing risks of respiratory conditions, cardiovascular issues, and certain cancers.
Sleep disruptions	Long shifts and irregular schedules contribute to chronic sleep deprivation, which weakens immune function, impairs cognitive

Risk	Impact
	performance, and increases risks of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and mental health challenges.

Mental health challenges

Repeated exposure to trauma and high-stress environments can take a heavy toll on front-line workers' mental well-being.

Challenge	Impact
Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)	Regular exposure to trauma — such as violent incidents, critical injuries, and life-threatening emergencies — can lead to PTSD, causing flashbacks, hypervigilance, and avoidance behaviours. Unaddressed PTSD can impact job performance and personal relationships.
Compassion fatigue and burnout	The emotional strain of constantly caring for those in distress can result in exhaustion, detachment, and reduced job satisfaction, increasing the risk of burnout and early career attrition.

Barriers to accessing care

Despite the significant health risks they face, front-line workers often encounter challenges in seeking care.

Barrier	Impact
Stigma and mental health	Cultural expectations of toughness and resilience may prevent workers from seeking mental health support for fear of judgment or professional consequences.
Time constraints and accessibility	Long shifts and unpredictable schedules make it difficult to attend health care appointments or access consistent mental health support.
Lack of culturally competent care	Many front-line workers feel that health care providers do not fully understand the unique stressors of their jobs, leading to frustration and reluctance to seek care.

Looking ahead

Addressing these health risks and barriers is a key focus of the lessons that follow. By integrating cultural competency into your practice, you can help create a more supportive and accessible health care experience for front-line workers.

3. Cultural competency for health care providers

Who are health care providers?

There are countless roles that health care providers fill every day to keep civilians safe and healthy across Canada. HCPs include a wide range of workers who deliver care in emergency settings, such as:

- Nurses
- Personal support workers
- Doctors
- Orderlies
- Midwives

Their roles involve unique challenges, requiring awareness and culturally competent support.

Awareness

Learning objectives	Why this matters
- Recognize how cultural background and biases influence the way health care providers are perceived and supported. - Understand how these biases affect perceptions of health care providers' mental health needs, particularly during emergencies.	Health care providers operate in high-pressure environments that can have lasting effects on their well-being. Your own views and assumptions about them can shape how they experience care and support. Reflecting on these biases helps foster better relationships and ensures they receive the care they need.

Understanding the scope of health care work in emergencies

During disasters, conflicts, and crises, health care providers take on physically and emotionally demanding roles. These jobs often involve:

- Long shifts with little rest
- High patient loads and exposure to suffering
- Ethical dilemmas when resources are limited
- Increased personal risk, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic

A culture of resilience often discourages discussions about mental health, making it even harder for providers to seek help.

Recognizing the impact of social identity in high-stress situations

Social identity factors—such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status—can shape how health care providers experience crises.

- BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) providers may face additional stress due to discrimination or language barriers.
- Immigrant and internationally trained health care workers may struggle with credential recognition, workplace biases, or lack of culturally appropriate support.

Reflective questions

- What assumptions do you have about health care providers' mental health needs?
- How might these needs differ during emergencies compared to normal conditions?
- How do these challenges affect their ability to perform their jobs?

Sensitivity

Learning objectives	Why this matters

• Develop emotional awareness of the stress and health challenges faced by front-line health care workers. • Recognize how social and occupational factors contribute to their well-being.	Culturally sensitive care requires a willingness to understand the challenges faced by health care workers. Recognizing their experiences allows you to provide informed, compassionate support.

Emotional and mental health stressors for health care providers

It is important to recognize the emotional toll of front-line work and repeated exposure to trauma. Health care providers often experience:

- High levels of emotional exhaustion from continuous exposure to suffering and death.
- Limited time for recovery due to demanding shift structures.
- Increased rates of burnout, especially during prolonged crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

A registered practical nurse (RPN) who worked during the COVID-19 pandemic shared:

> "I used to blame myself a lot… I was supposed to be their caretaker, and I couldn't take care of them because I couldn't even take care of myself."

Cultural sensitivity to mental health disparities in crisis response

Systemic barriers make it harder for some providers to access mental health support:

- Lower-income workers may struggle with costs, lack of paid leave, or culturally appropriate services.
- Workers from equity-denied groups may face microaggressions in addition to crisis-related stress.

A study from the Trauma & Recovery Research Unit at McMaster University found that:

- 40.6 per cent of racial/ethnic minority health care workers met the clinical threshold for PTSD.
- 55–65 per cent exhibited symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Reflective question

What emotions and concerns might health care workers experience during emergencies that are amplified by their roles?

Knowledge

Learning objectives	Why this matters
- Identify common mental health challenges faced by front-line health care workers during crises. - Understand how cultural identity influences mental health experiences and coping strategies.	Health care providers working in emergency settings face significant mental health risks, which can persist long after the crisis ends. Recognizing these challenges allows you to support them more effectively.

Mental health risks about health care providers

Front-line health care workers in Canada commonly experience:

- Depression, anxiety, and burnout
- Sleep disturbances
- Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Disasters and emergencies increase the risk of PTSD due to repeated exposure to traumatic events. For example, emergency room doctors may develop anxiety and depression from constant high-stakes decision-making.

The role of cultural identity in mental health experiences

Cultural identity shapes mental health symptoms, coping mechanisms, and help-seeking behaviours. Some workers may prefer alternative forms of support, such as community or faith-based organizations.

A health care worker reflected on barriers for immigrant providers:

> "Discussions around mental health and trauma culturally for some workers is something they're very unaware of, or they're not comfortable with, and so there's not a lot of buy-in. And because most of that work is done by immigrant men and women, mostly women, I had wondered if part of the lack of uptake was… not awareness, or even that very basic beginning of, 'Oh, just how are doing?' or exploring some of those things."

Reflective question

What specific stressors make health care workers working in emergency settings more susceptible to depression and anxiety?

Skills

Learning objectives	Why this matters
• Apply culturally aware skills to support front-line health care providers. • Offer effective mental health support during emergencies and disasters.	Health care workers play a vital role during crises. To support them, you need to engage in empathetic, non-judgmental communication, address their unique health concerns, and provide resources

	that are accessible and culturally appropriate.

Building culturally competent communication skills

Supporting health care workers effectively means:

- Respecting cultural perspectives when discussing mental health.
- Listening actively and validating their experiences.
- Using trauma-informed approaches to recognize and address psychological distress.
- Including local mental health services in crisis planning to improve access.

A health care provider highlighted the lack of support available:

"I've met and worked with a lot of nurses who have experienced untold amounts of traumatic exposure — but there's very little support for them in managing any of that and acknowledgement of it. If I had a magic wand, I'd create a clinic that does what we do but for health care people. And [I would] make it accessible."

Building trust and rapport in crisis situations

Trust is key in culturally competent care. You can strengthen connections by:

- Providing support and resources in multiple languages, particularly for BIPOC health care workers.
- Recognizing how systemic factors impact their well-being.
- Creating spaces where workers feel safe discussing mental health concerns.

One worker shared how cultural identity impacted a colleague's ability to speak up:

"A friend of mine who's a brown woman — an immigrant [who] had a lot of trauma growing up, both in her family of origin and in systemic

racism that she experienced elsewhere…. She felt very unsafe to speak up or share how her trauma helped her be empathetic with people…. She was someone who was told if this bothers you too much this is probably not the right work for you."

Reflective question

How can you build trust with front-line health care workers while respecting diverse backgrounds?

4. Cultural competency for public safety personnel

Who are public safety personnel?

Public safety personnel (PSP) play a critical role in protecting communities and responding to emergencies. They come from diverse backgrounds and work under extreme conditions that can impact their well-being.

The main categories of PSP include:

- Law enforcement (police officers, border officers, corrections officers)
- Fire services
- Emergency medical services (EMS)
- Specialized emergency services

Each of these roles presents unique challenges, requiring both awareness and culturally competent support.

Awareness

Learning objectives	Why this matters
• Reflect on how your cultural background and biases influence how you view and support PSP. • Recognize how biases shape perceptions of PSP's mental health needs and the challenges they face during crises.	Public safety roles can take a lasting toll on workers' health and well-being. Your views and beliefs about PSP influence their willingness to seek help and how you build relationships with them. It's important to continually reflect on these perceptions and how they may affect your interactions.

Understanding the scope of PSP in emergencies

Public safety workers encounter daily stressors that intensify during crises. Their responsibilities can include:

- Responding to violence and critical incidents
- Navigating ethical dilemmas in high-pressure situations
- Facing risks to personal safety
- Managing community distrust in some contexts

For example, police officers often experience stigma around seeking mental health support. One officer shared:

> "There's still that stigma — people are worried about if I say something, am I going to be looked at as weaker, or is it going to hurt me in promotion for something?"

Recognizing the impact of social identity in high-stress situations

Factors like race, gender, and socioeconomic status shape how PSP experience health challenges and seek support.

- BIPOC PSP and immigrant workers may face language barriers or discrimination, making it harder to express their mental health struggles.
- Women in male-dominated fields, like firefighting, often face additional stress from workplace biases and expectations.

A female firefighter reflected on this challenge:

> "I noticed that the women have it way harder than men do. Just with the main criticism of women — they can't do the job — which means that all the women we'd have on our job certainly can do the job. But from all the old-school people, that's something I have seen."

Reflective questions

How can social identity influence mental health needs of PSP during emergencies?

How does this compare to non-emergency situations?

Sensitivity

Learning objectives	Why this matters
• Develop an emotional understanding of the unique challenges faced by PSP. • Consider the diverse backgrounds and pressures that impact their well-being.	Supporting PSP requires an openness to learning about their experiences and a willingness to develop the skills needed to provide effective care.

Emotional and mental health stressors for PSP

Public safety personnel frequently experience traumatic events, which can lead to delayed or suppressed emotional responses.

- Many are encouraged to suppress emotions in high-stakes environments.
- Some develop moral injury — a deep sense of guilt or distress from actions taken during crises.

For example, a paramedic described a distressing experience during the COVID-19 pandemic:

> "When we came back after gowning up, the patient was lying face down on his steps. He had a cardiac arrest in the time it took for us to finish putting on this [personal protective equipment]. We went from taking a call for someone who was still alive to someone who had died in the time for us to put on PPE."

Cultural sensitivity to mental health disparities in crisis response

Social and economic disparities affect PSP's ability to seek mental health support:

- 2SLGBTQIA+ PSP may face added stress from workplace bias or discrimination.
- Low-income PSP may struggle to afford mental health care due to financial barriers.

A paramedic reflected on this challenge:

> "I should be getting psychological help. But it's expensive."

Reflective questions

What factors contribute to burnout among PSP?

What emotions and concerns might be amplified during disasters and emergencies?

Knowledge

Learning objectives	Why this matters
• Identify common mental health challenges faced by PSP in crisis situations. • Understand how cultural identity influences their stress, coping strategies, and help-seeking behaviour.	PSP face significant mental health risks due to the high-stress nature of their work. These challenges don't disappear when a crisis ends — many PSP continue to experience lasting effects, including PTSD, anxiety, and burnout. Without proper support, these stressors can impact their well-being, job performance, and long-term health.

Understanding the mental health challenges of PSP in crisis situations

The psychological impact of crisis response can last long after the emergency ends. PSP often experience:

- PTSD from repeated exposure to trauma
- Sleep disturbances that worsen mental health symptoms
- Depression and anxiety due to sustained stress

A firefighter shared how sleep deprivation affected them during the pandemic:

> "I wasn't sleeping. I could only sleep for a couple of hours at a time, day or night. I was always tired."

A correctional officer described the impact of repeated trauma exposure:

> "We witness things that are beyond human comprehension. Of course we're all having these mental health diagnoses and getting PTSD and all of this stuff."

The role of cultural identity in mental health experiences

Cultural identity influences how PSP experience mental health, cope with stress, and seek support.

- Indigenous PSP may rely on cultural traditions for resilience, yet these approaches are not always recognized or supported in mainstream emergency response settings.
- Immigrant PSP may turn to community or faith-based organizations rather than formal mental health services.
- BIPOC PSP often experience additional stress due to discrimination or systemic barriers within their workplace.

A study by D'Alessandro-Lowe (2024) found that PSP who received organizational support and had a strong sense of spiritual well-being experienced fewer symptoms of moral injury during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Reflective questions

How might race, gender, or ethnicity impact PSP mental health outcomes?

How does cultural identity shape mental health expression, help-seeking, and treatment preferences?

Skills

Learning objectives	Why this matters
• Use culturally informed skills to support PSP effectively. • Provide compassionate and effective mental health support during emergencies.	Supporting PSP requires a caring, non-judgmental approach that acknowledges their unique health challenges. Flexibility and cultural awareness are essential, especially when assisting those from underrepresented groups who face additional barriers.

Building culturally competent communication skills

Effective communication is key to supporting PSP:

- Use trauma-informed approaches that acknowledge their experiences.
- Listen actively and validate their concerns.
- Respect cultural perspectives on mental health and coping.

A PSP professional described the importance of resilience in their field:

"We discuss very shocking things — things we don't realize are shocking. [People in this role] need to be really upfront that they're going to be OK with this. We don't want to traumatize someone by trying to share our trauma. That defeats the purpose [by] creating another victim."

Building trust and rapport in crisis situations

Establishing trust takes time, but it's essential for supporting PSP.

- Peer support programs tailored to their roles can help break down stigma.
- Accessible resources — such as multilingual mental health services — can increase engagement.

Reflective questions

How can you build trust with PSP while respecting diverse backgrounds?

How can cultural competency improve mental health support for PSP during crises?

5. Cultural competency for military service members

Who makes up the Canadian Military?

The Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) consists of three main branches:

- The Royal Canadian Navy
- The Canadian Army
- Royal Canadian Air Force

Within the CAF, there are Regular Force members, Reserve Force members, and Canadian Rangers.

Additionally, support personnel — such as civilian staff — play critical roles in Canadian Military operations.

Awareness

Learning objectives	Why this matters
- Recognize how cultural background and biases influence perceptions of military service members. - Understand how biases affect assumptions about their mental health needs. - Identify the unique stressors military personnel experience during conflicts, disasters, and emergencies.	Military service has lasting effects on health and well-being. When supporting this group, it's essential to reflect on your own views and assumptions about service members. These perceptions can shape their willingness to seek help and impact the relationships you build with them. Regular self-reflection is key to ensuring unbiased, effective support.

Understanding military roles in emergencies

Military personnel are often among the first responders in disaster and crisis situations. Their responsibilities come with unique challenges, including:

- Trauma from combat and exposure to high-stakes situations
- Moral injury from difficult decisions and ethical dilemmas
- Mental strain from prolonged deployments away from family
- Pressure to suppress mental health struggles due to military culture

The military's emphasis on resilience, discipline, and mission focus can create barriers to discussing mental health openly.

Recognizing the impact of social identity in high-stress situations

Social identity factors — such as race, gender, and socioeconomic background — can shape how military members experience stress and seek support.

- Service members from marginalized groups may face additional pressures related to their identity and past experiences.
- BIPOC and immigrant military personnel may encounter stigma or bias when accessing mental health care.

Reflective question

What assumptions do you have about the mental health impact of emergencies on military service members?

Sensitivity

Learning objectives	Why this matters
- Develop an emotional understanding of the mental health challenges faced by military personnel.	To provide effective support, you need to be motivated to learn about the military's

● Recognize how diverse backgrounds and occupational stressors shape their experiences.	unique stressors, improve your cultural competency, and develop the skills necessary to assist service members coping with the aftermath of crises.

Emotional and mental health stressors for military personnel

Military personnel face intense emotional and psychological challenges.

- Exposure to combat and morally complex situations increases the risk of PTSD and depression.
- Reintegration struggles — i.e., returning to civilian life after deployment — can be difficult, particularly if family members lack understanding or support.
- Prolonged separations from loved ones can contribute to isolation and emotional distress.

Cultural sensitivity to mental health disparities in crisis response

- 2SLGBTQIA+ service members may experience discrimination or lack of acceptance, making it harder to access mental health support.
- Cultural, racial, and economic factors can affect how military personnel seek and receive care.

Reflective question

What concerns and emotions might military personnel experience during emergencies that are heightened by their roles?

Knowledge

Learning objectives	Why this matters

• Identify common mental health challenges faced by military personnel in crisis situations. • Understand how cultural identity influences stress, coping strategies, and help-seeking behaviour.	Military service members often experience long-term health impacts due to their roles. Understanding these risks allows you to provide better support during and after crises.

Mental health challenges among military personnel

CAF members frequently face mental health issues due to the physical and emotional demands of their jobs. These challenges include:

- PTSD from combat or traumatic experiences
- Depression and anxiety linked to sustained stress and moral injury
- Increased suicide risk in certain populations
- Substance use disorders as a coping mechanism

Role of cultural identity in mental health experiences

Cultural identity influences mental health symptoms, coping mechanisms, and help-seeking behaviours.

- Members of cultural minorities may face stigma within military culture for accessing mental health support.
- Faith, community, and cultural traditions can shape how military personnel navigate stress and trauma.

Reflective questions

What specific stressors make military personnel more vulnerable to depression and anxiety?

Which mental health conditions — such as PTSD or moral injury — are most common among military members returning from crises?

Skills

Learning objectives	Why this matters
• Apply culturally informed skills to support military personnel effectively. • Provide compassionate and effective mental health support during emergencies.	Supporting military personnel requires empathy, flexibility, and cultural awareness. To build trust, engage with service members in a non-judgmental, respectful manner. Recognize and address their unique mental health challenges — especially among equity-denied populations — and remain open to learning about their specific needs.

Communication skills for crisis support

Effective communication with military personnel involves:

- Active listening to foster trust and demonstrate understanding
- Using respectful language that aligns with military culture and values
- Recognizing privacy considerations when discussing mental health stigma

Military communication is shaped by discipline, mission-focus, and chain of command structures. Adapting your approach to these frameworks can help build rapport and trust.

Building trust and rapport in crisis situations

Establishing trust with military personnel requires:

- Active listening and respect for military traditions
- Understanding the cultural aspects of military life and values
- Acknowledging the challenges of reintegration and mental health stigma

Reflective questions

How can you ensure military personnel receive the mental health support they need during and after crises?

What strategies can you use to build trust while respecting their cultural and occupational background?

6. Cultural competency for military service Veterans

Who are Veterans?

Veterans are former members of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), including those who served in the:

- Canadian Army
- Royal Canadian Navy
- Royal Canadian Air Force

Additionally, former members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) are often considered Veterans.

Awareness

Learning objectives	Why this matters
- Recognize how cultural background and biases influence perceptions of Veterans. - Understand how these biases shape assumptions about Veterans' mental health needs. - Identify the unique stressors Veterans may experience during and after conflicts, disasters, and emergencies.	Veterans have served in high-pressure, high-risk environments that can have lasting effects on their health and well-being. When supporting this population, reflect on your own perceptions of Veterans and how these assumptions might influence their willingness to seek help. Ongoing self-reflection is key to ensuring unbiased and effective support.

Veterans and emergency response

Veterans may be called upon to assist during disasters and national emergencies. Their military training equips them with critical skills, but the experience of re-engaging in high-stress environments can also:

- Trigger past trauma or moral injury.
- Reinforce stigma around mental health struggles.
- Exacerbate physical injuries sustained during service.

Recognizing the impact of social identity in high-stress situations

Social identity — such as race, gender, and socioeconomic background — shapes how Veterans experience crises and access support.

- Veterans from racialized communities may encounter discrimination or cultural stigma around seeking mental health care.
- Female Veterans may have different service experiences than their male counterparts, influencing how they navigate post-service challenges.
- Low-income Veterans may struggle to access adequate health care and social support.

Reflective questions

What assumptions do you have about the mental health needs of Veterans?

How might emergencies or disasters re-trigger past trauma for Veterans?

Sensitivity

Learning objectives	Why this matters
- Develop an emotional understanding of the mental health challenges faced by Veterans.	Veterans often have a strong sense of duty, resilience, and camaraderie, which can

• Recognize how military culture and personal identity shape their experiences.	make acknowledging mental health struggles difficult. They may feel a heightened sense of responsibility during crises, even at the expense of their own well-being.

Emotional and mental health stressors for Veterans

- Exposure to past trauma may resurface during emergencies, particularly if they are called to serve in crisis response efforts.
- A strong sense of duty and camaraderie may compel them to assist, even when it negatively impacts their mental health.
- Isolation and loss of purpose post-service can contribute to depression, anxiety, and difficulty reintegrating into civilian life.

Cultural sensitivity to mental health disparities in crisis response

- Veterans from diverse cultural backgrounds may experience stigma against seeking mental health care.
- Service-related injuries may become aggravated during physically demanding crisis situations.
- Lack of culturally competent health care can prevent Veterans from receiving the support they need.

Reflective question

How might a Veteran's sense of duty impact their willingness to seek help during crises?

Knowledge

Learning objectives	Why this matters
- Identify common mental health challenges faced by Veterans in crisis situations. - Understand how cultural identity influences their stress, coping strategies, and help-seeking behaviour.	Veterans experience mental health challenges that are often exacerbated by disasters and emergencies. Recognizing these challenges allows you to offer better, more targeted support.

Mental health challenges among Veterans

Veterans may experience:

- PTSD and moral injury from past deployments and combat.
- Heightened anxiety or depression due to re-engagement in crisis settings.
- A sense of loss or hopelessness if unable to serve in times of need.
- Exacerbation of service-related injuries during high-stress events.

The role of cultural identity in mental health experiences

Cultural identity influences how Veterans process trauma, seek support, and reintegrate into civilian life.

- Veterans from racialized communities may face additional stressors such as discrimination or lack of culturally competent care.
- Experiences of moral injury can make it difficult for some Veterans to participate in frontline response efforts.

Reflective questions

What specific stressors make Veterans more vulnerable to depression and anxiety?

How should these factors be considered if Veterans are called into service again?

Skills

Learning objectives	Why this matters
• Apply culturally informed skills to effectively support Veterans. • Provide compassionate and effective mental health support during emergencies.	Veterans have unique needs shaped by their service history, cultural background, and personal experiences. Providing effective support requires flexibility, empathy, and a commitment to culturally competent care.

Communication skills for crisis support

Supporting Veterans means:

- Practicing active listening to build trust and validate their experiences.
- Using respectful, military-aware language to create a sense of understanding.
- Recognizing institutional mistrust that may prevent Veterans from seeking help.

Building trust and rapport in crisis situations

Supporting Veterans means:

- Practicing active listening to build trust and validate their experiences.
- Using respectful, military-aware language to create a sense of understanding.
- Recognizing institutional mistrust that may prevent Veterans from seeking help.

Reflective questions

How can you create an environment where Veterans feel safe sharing their struggles?

What strategies help build trust while respecting their lived experiences?

7. Cultural competency for essential service workers

Who are essential service workers?

Essential service workers (ESWs) perform critical roles during emergencies and disasters. Their work ensures that infrastructure, supply chains, and public services continue to function.

This category includes:

- Utility workers, plant operators, engineers
- Grocery store workers, food processors, farm workers
- Transportation workers, including truck drivers, rail, bus, air, and boat crews

Put simply, ESWs are the people who keep society running when crises strike.

Awareness

Learning objectives	Why this matters
- Recognize how cultural background and biases influence perceptions of ESWs. - Understand how biases shape assumptions about ESWs' mental health needs. - Identify the unique stressors ESWs face during emergencies.	ESWs play a critical role in keeping society running during emergencies, often working under demanding and high–risk conditions. Despite their importance, their contributions are sometimes overlooked, and they may struggle to access the support they need.

Understanding ESWs' roles in emergencies

ESWs work under intense conditions, often without the same protections or recognition as other front-line workers. Their challenges include:

- High exposure to risk, including health hazards and physical dangers.
- Unpredictable schedules with long, exhausting shifts.
- Limited job security, especially for workers in precarious or low-wage employment.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, grocery store workers faced public hostility, increased workloads, and a lack of clear safety guidelines, which took a toll on their mental health.

Recognizing the impact of social identity in high-stress situations

Social identity—such as race, gender, and socioeconomic background—shapes how ESWs experience crises and seek support.

- Racialized workers may face discrimination or lack of workplace protections.
- Precarious workers (for example, gig workers and temporary employees) may have no access to benefits like sick leave or mental health support.
- Language barriers may prevent some ESWs from accessing emergency resources.

Reflective question

How do the mental health needs of ESWs differ from traditional front-line workers during emergencies?

Sensitivity

Learning objectives	Why this matters
• Develop an emotional understanding of the mental health challenges ESWs face.	Providing effective support requires a willingness to understand the stress, risks, and pressures that ESWs endure. Many

● Recognize how diverse backgrounds and working conditions shape their experiences.	ESWs lack job security, benefits, or proper health protections — making them particularly vulnerable during crises.

Emotional and mental health stressors for ESW

Common stressors include:

- Anxiety and burnout from high exposure and long hours.
- Public aggression, particularly in retail and transportation settings.
- Isolation, especially for long-haul truckers or those in high-risk environments.

For example, grocery store workers reported high levels of stress and fear when dealing with aggressive customers during the pandemic. Many lacked crisis training and were unprepared for extreme hostility.

Cultural sensitivity to mental health disparities in crisis response

Cultural and economic disparities influence how ESWs experience stress and access support:

- Migrant workers may have limited rights or fear retaliation for speaking out.
- Lower-income ESWs may lack financial resources to seek mental health care.
- Language barriers may prevent some ESWs from accessing services.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many delivery workers faced harassment, lacked health insurance, and struggled to find mental health support.

Reflective question

What emotions and concerns might ESWs experience during crises that are exacerbated by their roles?

Knowledge

Learning objectives	Why this matters
- Identify common mental health challenges ESWs face during crises. - Understand how cultural identity influences their stress, coping strategies, and help-seeking behaviour.	ESWs often face mental health risks that extend beyond the immediate crisis. Recognizing these risks helps ensure they receive meaningful, long-term support.

Mental health challenges among ESWs

ESWs may experience:

- Increased anxiety and depression due to job uncertainty.
- Burnout and exhaustion from overwork and exposure.
- Isolation and loneliness, particularly among gig workers or transport workers.

During crises, many ESWs report feeling invisible or undervalued, despite playing critical roles in society's survival.

The role of cultural identity in mental health experiences

Cultural identity shapes how ESWs navigate stress and seek support:

- Racialized ESWs may experience discrimination or microaggressions in the workplace.
- Migrant workers may rely on community networks rather than formal healthcare.
- Women in male-dominated roles (for example, transportation) may face additional stress from workplace biases.

Reflective question

Why might delivery drivers or gig workers be at higher risk of isolation and depression during a crisis?

Skills

Learning objectives	Why this matters
• Apply culturally informed skills to effectively support ESWs. • Provide compassionate and effective mental health support during emergencies.	ESWs often lack access to traditional support systems. To provide meaningful assistance, you must engage with them in a non-judgmental, empathetic manner while recognizing barriers to care.

Communication skills for crisis support

When interacting with ESWs:

- Use active listening to validate their experiences.
- Respect cultural preferences and language needs.
- Recognize systemic barriers that prevent access to care.

Crisis response efforts should prioritize early intervention and culturally competent communication strategies to reduce stigma and increase engagement.

Building trust and rapport in crisis situations

ESWs may have precarious employment status, be new immigrants, or lack knowledge of available resources.

To build trust:

- Acknowledge institutional mistrust that some workers may feel.
- Ensure services are accessible, including translation and culturally appropriate care.
- Leverage peer support programs tailored to different ESW roles.

Reflective question

How can you build trust with essential service workers by fostering a non–judgmental environment and respecting their diverse backgrounds?