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ELEVATING MENTAL HEALTH

Resilience in Adversity: Innovating Support Groups in the Wake of Natural Disasters

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Disclaimer

- Please be advised that this presentation includes images and discussions of recent fire incidents which some may find distressing. Viewer discretion is recommended, particularly for individuals who may find such content triggering. If at any point the content feels overwhelming, you are encouraged to take the necessary steps to care for your mental and emotional wellbeing. Support is available through our team for anyone who may need assistance during or after this presentation.

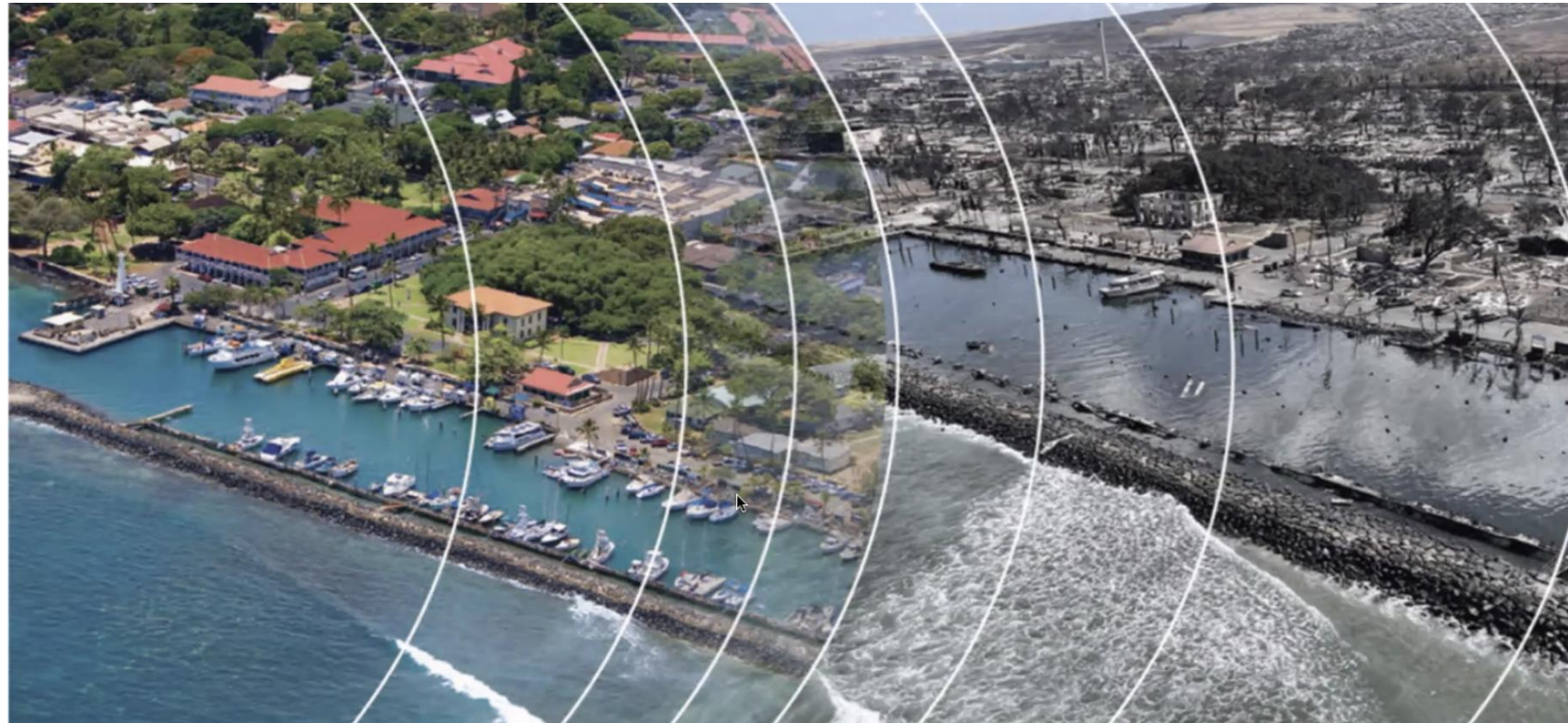


August 8, 2023

Lahaina, Maui

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Overview: On August 8-9, 2023, Lahaina town on the island of Maui in the state of Hawaii experienced a wildfire disaster recognized as the deadliest in the last 100 years in the U.S. Fueled by critical fire weather conditions and an environment with drought and dry brush, four fires ignited on Maui on August 8th stretching firefighting capacity, causing widespread destruction and wreaking devastating impacts on the community.



Timeline:

The Hawaii Attorney General commissioned an independent report on the Maui wildfires which has resulted in the first phase report on the timeline of the Maui Wildfire Disaster with two further reports to be completed in 2024.

Here are a few of the events tracked in this timeline:

Date	Time	Event
8/2-6/23	various	Moderate wind warnings due to Hurricane Dora in Central Pacific
8/6/23	3:33	Red flag warning from NWS – critical fire weather conditions due to gusty winds, very dry fuels, low humidity
8/6/23	15:33	Red flag warning – critical fire weather conditions KB Drought Index 300
8/7/23	3:15	Statewide NWS Red Flag warning issued
8/7/23	various	Social media reports of smoke, brush fires, road closures
8/8/23	0:22	Kula/Olinda fire reported, 1100 acres 0% containment
8/8/23	0:56	First Fire Unit Dispatched
8/8/23	6:12	Puluehu Fire reported
8/8/23	6:34	First Lahaina fire reported
8/8/23	6:50	First report of bodies found
8/8/23	14:55	Second Lahaina fire reported as active & uncontained for over a week
8/17/23		Top Maui County Emergency Management Official resigns for health reasons
4/17/24		First of three phases of independent analysis of the Lahaina Fire

August 8, 2023

Lahaina, Maui

- At least 101 lives lost; many more were missing or unaccounted for in the early days following the fire.
- Chaos as down powerlines blocked evacuation routes already impacted by smoke and low visibility.
- Evacuees were trapped and rescue personnel were hindered by traffic gridlock from responding to the immense scale and scope of the wildfires (60% of Hawaii communities have only one way in and one way out).
- Over 2,200 residential and commercial structures were obliterated as historic Lahaina saw extensive devastation. Some likened it to a war zone. The wildfires caused \$6 billion in damages.
- Thousands of residents were homeless, facing unemployment, and many were grieving the loss of loved ones, their town, familiar surroundings; and experiencing catastrophic stress. Some people fled into the ocean to escape the fires and had to wait for rescue.
- People had to help each other find food, water, shelter, support and comfort as the distance of Hawaii from the rest of the US meant it took time for the Federal Disaster Response to supplement local initiatives. We met community members who set up in a park with solar panels and offered free food, water, medical care, clothing, and linkages to needed services. Neighbor islands like Molokai sent over boats with food, supplies, generators, and caring support.
- The Maui community is still waiting to hear the facts about what happened and the cause of the disaster and loss of life. Investigations continue into problems with emergency preparedness, and coordination before / during the wildfires. This remains a controversial topic. It appears that the limited resources available were outmatched by extreme weather and fire conditions.

August 8, 2023

Lahaina, Maui

Impacts at the personal level

Shock and grief

Homelessness

Unemployment

Lack of resources

Resilience and adaptation

For some anger, numbing, survivor guilt

For some conflict or withdrawal

Somatic responses – sleep disturbance, headache/body aches, muscle tension

Worry, intrusive thoughts and images, confusion, disorientation

Amber's Timeline



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Night of the fire
hurricane & the
day after



Immediate Impact on Mental Health

Statistics or data on
the broader mental
health impact in
disaster-affected
areas

Amber's mental health
experience

Discuss the immediate
mental health
challenges in the
aftermath

Specific challenges
faced by Amber and
similar stories from
the community

- **Acute Stress Reactions:** In the immediate aftermath, many individuals experience acute stress reactions. These reactions may include confusion, disorientation, and intense emotional upheaval, which can disrupt daily functioning.
- **Increased Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders:** Studies typically show a significant increase in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression following natural disasters. For instance, rates of PTSD can increase by as much as 30-60% in directly affected populations. (We wanted to try to combat this).
- **Impact on Vulnerable Populations:** Vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and those with pre-existing mental health conditions are particularly at risk for exacerbated symptoms. For instance, a study following a major fire incident revealed that children displayed a 45% increase in symptoms of anxiety and fear related to losing their homes or family members.
- **Challenges in Accessing Mental Health Services:** Disruption of infrastructure can severely limit access to mental health services when they are most needed. Additionally, the stigma associated with seeking mental health care can further decrease service utilization.
- **Community and Social Impacts:** The cohesion of the community can be both a buffer and a stressor. Strong community ties can provide support and improve resilience, whereas communities with fewer social ties might experience a higher incidence of isolation and mental health issues.

Mental Health of America Hawaii Partnership

Friends Since Ever Since

- The mission of Mental Health America of Hawaii is to promote mental health and wellness through education, advocacy, service, and access to care. We endeavor to reduce the stigma of mental illness and improve the overall care, treatment and empowerment of those with mental illnesses – children, adults, elders – and their families. We had recently lost our affiliate leader in Maui and didn't have any programs there.
- NAMI Hawaii wanted to do something but didn't know what yet.
- MHA called us because we do support groups, and they trusted our model.
- Already an established relationship: do annual conference together, Mental Health Mahalo Awards, etc. They are our buddies.
- They helped us with the location: James Cameron Center & advertising
- We partnered with Danielle Bergan of Mental Health America of Hawaii on Maui to provide in person NAMI support group sessions. We partnered with them for a total of 13 sessions over 6 days. And more to date.

Psychological First Aid (PFA) and Skills for Psychological Recovery (SPR)

National Child Traumatic Stress Network

- **PFA:** Psychological First Aid (PFA) Online is 5-hour interactive online course that helps participants learn the core actions of PFA and describes ways to apply them in different post-disaster scenarios and with different survivor needs. This course also covers provider well-being before, during, and after disasters. This course is relevant for new providers who are wanting to be oriented to PFA, as well as for seasoned practitioners who want a review of the PFA concepts.
- **SPR:** Skills for Psychological Recovery (SPR) is a 5-hour interactive course designed for providers to help survivors gain skills to manage distress and cope with post-disaster stress and adversity. This course is for individuals who want to learn about using SPR, learning the goals and rationale of each core skill, delivering SPR, and supporting survivors in the aftermath of a disaster or traumatic event.

No one that has been in a disaster has a mental health condition within the first 90 days. Everything they are experiencing is NORMAL.

Did not want anyone to feel stigmatized or like something was wrong with them if they came. Just wanted to give space.

<https://learn.nctsn.org/course/index.php?categoryid=11>

NAMI

Principles of Support

NAMI Model

In the early days nothing is considered a mental illness yet. I also needed to think about culture & community.

Principles of Support

1. We will see the person first, not the illness.
2. We recognize that mental illnesses are medical illnesses that may have environmental triggers.
3. We understand that mental illnesses can be traumatic events.
4. We aim for better coping skills.
5. We find strength in sharing experiences.
6. We reject stigma and do not tolerate discrimination.
7. We won't judge anyone's pain as less than our own.
8. We forgive ourselves and reject guilt.
9. We embrace humor as healthy.
10. We accept we cannot solve all problems.
11. We expect a future that is ours to shape.
12. We will never give up hope.

NAMI Principles of Support

NAMI Model

Principles of Support

Use them when:

- Someone or the group is negative or hopeless about an issue over which he or she has little or no control
- Someone's personal issue can be connected to a universal goal that we are all striving for

Why the Principles of Support Are Important:

- To connect us to our highest aspirations in dealing with mental illness
- To get everyone talking about their reflections on these principles

NAMI Principles of Support

NAMI Model

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NAMI Maui Strong Support Group

This gave people power,
ownership, and a sense
of community.

Principles of Support

1. We embrace the cultures of Hawai'i, recognizing our resilience and the importance of cultural traditions in healing our communities and ourselves.
2. We acknowledge each individual's unique experience and pain.
3. We acknowledge that trauma affects the mind, body, and spirit.
4. We understand that anger and grief are natural responses to this disaster.
5. We find strength and healing in sharing our stories and experiences.
6. We uphold respect, dignity, and compassion for all, regardless of their story.
7. We acknowledge everyone's pain, understanding no one's suffering is lesser or greater.
8. We practice self-forgiveness and self-care.
9. We will find opportunities to laugh, play, and practice Aloha.
10. We accept that some losses are irreplaceable, yet we strive to move forward together.
11. Our collective spirit and unity will ensure we rebuild stronger. We will never lose hope.

NAMI National Support Group Agenda & Group Guidelines

Agenda

- Welcome
- Read Principles & Guidelines
- Check-In 2 min.
- Group Discussion
- Closing

Group Guidelines

1. Start and stop on time
2. Time limit for check-in
3. Absolute Confidentiality
4. Be respectful
5. Be mindful of others; no monopolizing or cross talk
6. Keep the conversation in the present
7. Empathize with each other's situation

NAMI Maui Strong Agenda & Group Guidelines

Agenda

- Welcome
- Read Principles & Guidelines
- Check-In 2 min.
- Group Discussion
- Closing

(stayed the same)

Group Guidelines

1. Start and stop on time
2. 2 min. time limit for check-in
3. What is said here stays here.
4. Be a mindful listener.
5. Empathize & Support: Each person's experience and feelings are valid.
6. Words can hurt AND help: if you can, reflect before speaking.

Needed things to be clear, explain what confidentiality meant. Needed to add one about sharing details, for some it was triggering, for others this was the only place to get some of these details out.

Support Group

How it played out on the field.

- MHA set the day and times
- First group on August 22nd
- 3 support groups a day: 9:30 AM, 11:30 AM, 1:30 AM
- At first 90 minutes, switched to 60 minutes
- Many people at one group and then only one at the next 2, sometimes good for the individual, sometimes they needed a full group
- Eventually switched to one a day
- Time adapted for people, eventually they started going back to work, school, etc.
- Problem finding a location: displacement of people who needed the group, housing/locations in general hard to find.
- So many other events happening, need their attention.
- In some ways it was too soon, but also just having the group gave people so much comfort. I would send out email invites and people were responding back thank you.

Group Wisdom

Group Processes

Tough Topics (Formerly Hot Potato) didn't work

Use Group Wisdom When:

- A group member or the group, encounters a shared challenge that could benefit from collective experiences.
- Individuals feel overwhelmed by their circumstances.
- The shared experiences and knowledge of the group can support another member.

Significance of Group Wisdom:

- To harness the collective wisdom, strength, and spirit of the community to address challenges.

What was the goal of this support group?

Hope Always.

- To provide a safe space for individuals to share their experiences, fostering a sense of community and understanding. A place where they could learn from each other.

Commonalities:

- Losing a sense of safety
- Housing
- Experiencing a fire
- Starting over
- Losing their town
- Losing loved ones
- Frustration with bureaucracy of FEMA and other assistance
- Uncertainty of the future
- Losing their jobs
- Loss of culturally significant places & artifacts

Emotional Stages

NAMI National Support Group Model

Emotional Stages of Recovery

NAMI is here for you at every stage.



I. Dealing with Catastrophic Events Crisis /Chaos /Shock Denial; “Normalizing” Despair; Detachment	Needs Support Comfort Empathy for current situation Help finding resources Crisis management Reassurance Empathy for pain Permission to be numb Hope
II. Learning to Cope Anger /Guilt /Resentment Recognition Grief	Needs To permit and vent feelings Education Self-care Networking Skill Training To let go To learn the system Hope
III. Moving into Advocacy Understanding Acceptance Advocacy /Action	Needs To restore balance in life Responsiveness from the system To find meaning A sense of empowerment Activism Hope

Emotional and Physical Responses Following a Disaster

1 of 4 slides

Survivor's Guilt

- Feeling responsible for surviving when others did not
- Feeling guilty that one's property remained intact while others lost theirs.
- Overwhelming guilt for actions taken or not taken during the disaster.
- Reliving the event and imagining different outcomes, wondering if more could have been done to help others.
- Difficulty accepting the "randomness" of disaster outcomes, wondering "Why me?" when reflecting on what was spared versus what was lost.

Grief

- Intense sorrow for the loss of life, homes, treasured possessions & anguish for the loss of the town's historical and cultural touchstones.
- Mourning the loss of cherished landmarks, local stores, and other familiar places that gave a sense of identity and belonging.
- Disorientation caused by the loss of familiar reference points, making the town feel foreign and unrecognizable.
- Emotional numbness or disbelief, struggling to accept the extent of the devastation.
- A sense of longing for the way things were, accompanied by a feeling of helplessness about the changed landscape.

Emotional and Physical Responses Following a Disaster

2 of 4 slides

Anxiety

- Constant worry about future safety or potential harm
- Physical symptoms like rapid heartbeat, trembling, dizziness, or shortness of breath
- Feeling on edge, or an overwhelming sense of doom

Post-Traumatic Stress

- Re-experiencing the trauma through flashbacks, nightmares, or intrusive thoughts
- Avoidance of places, people, or activities that remind of the traumatic event
- Changes in mood, feeling detached, and persistent negative beliefs about oneself or others
- Fear of smoke, sound of sirens, wind, sleeping in buildings like shelters (belief they may catch fire)

Depression

- Persistent sadness or feeling of emptiness
- Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed
- Changes in appetite, sleep patterns, or energy levels

Emotional and Physical Responses Following a Disaster

3 of 4 slides

Physical Symptoms

- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Muscle tension or headaches
- Stomach problems or digestive disturbances
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Insomnia
- teeth/jaw pain, clenching
- Disruption in hygiene

Dissociation

- Feeling detached from one's surroundings or from one's body
- Feeling as if the world is unreal or dreamlike
- Difficulty remembering details about the traumatic event

Substance Use or Abuse

- Using drugs or alcohol to cope with distressing emotions
- Increase in the amount or frequency of substance use
- Dependence or addiction as a result of increased use following the disaster

Changes in Behavior and Personality (behaviors previously not seen in someone)

- Irritability, anger, or outbursts of aggression
- Social withdrawal or isolation
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions

Emotional and Physical Responses Following a Disaster

4 of 4 slides

Sleep Disturbances

- Difficulty falling asleep, with an active mind replaying traumatic events.
- Frequent waking throughout the night, often related to nightmares or vivid dreams associated with the disaster.
- Restless and unrefreshing sleep, leading to fatigue during the day.
- Fear of nighttime, particularly if the disaster occurred during the night or if darkness brings back memories of the event.
- Changes in sleep patterns, like sleeping more than usual as an escape, or avoiding sleep due to fear of nightmares.
- Physical discomfort, such as pain or aches, making it harder to sleep soundly.

Vicarious Trauma

- Vicarious trauma, happens when an individual becomes traumatized not by directly experiencing a traumatic event, but by hearing about or being exposed to another person's traumatic experience.
- Symptoms often mirror those of PTSD and can include:
 - Intense feelings of sadness, anger, or distress after hearing about someone else's traumatic experience.
 - Intrusive thoughts or imagery of another person's trauma.
 - Diminished engagement in daily activities or things that used to bring joy.
 - Heightened state of arousal, constantly on edge or jumpy.
 - Difficulty separating personal emotions from those of the trauma survivor.
 - Increased cynicism, numbness, or feelings of hopelessness.
 - Avoidance behaviors—avoiding places, people, or things that serve as reminders of the trauma narrative.
 - Changes in spiritual beliefs or a shaken worldview.
- Particularly common among caregivers, therapists, emergency responders, or anyone who is in a role of helping or listening to trauma survivors.

Emotional and Physical Responses Following a Disaster

- **Validation of Feelings:** By providing clear information about common responses to trauma, attendees can feel validated in their experiences. This validation is crucial as it helps individuals understand that their feelings are normal and expected given the circumstances.
- **Normalization of Reactions:** Discussing widespread emotional and physical reactions normalizes these experiences, reducing feelings of isolation or uniqueness that might contribute to stigma or self-doubt. It reassures attendees that they are not experiencing these reactions due to personal weakness or failure.
- **Fostering Community and Connection:** Knowing that others are going through similar struggles can foster a sense of community and solidarity among group members. This can lead to stronger support networks and shared coping strategies.
- **Encouraging Open Dialogue:** Armed with the knowledge that their reactions are typical; individuals may feel more comfortable sharing their experiences and seeking help. This openness can enhance the support group process and encourage a more interactive and engaged support group environment.
- **Guiding Recovery and Coping Strategies:** Understanding common reactions also helps in tailoring recovery and coping strategies that are most effective. This can guide facilitators to find group wisdom for more precise support and resources that address the specific phases and manifestations of disaster-related stress.
- **Reducing Anxiety About Symptoms:** For some, not understanding their physical or emotional reactions can be a source of additional stress or anxiety. Knowing that such reactions are expected can alleviate unnecessary worry about their health and mental state.

Partnership with HECO

Hawaiian Electric Company

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- The HECO Corporate Health & Wellness Director came to our group and experienced the model in action. She knew her employees needed support, and she thought this could help.
- Covered our flights & accommodations to support their staff.
- NAMI Hawaii was committed to provide support for Maui and people affected by the wildfires at no cost. So, we declined to get paid by HECO. The utility company did cover travel costs to, from and on Maui for our staff and volunteers.
- We did not get paid. We asked HECO to consider being a sponsor for our NAMIWalks in 2023 and hope they will sponsor a future NAMIWalks Hawaii.
- A lot of the employees that came to our support groups were displaced by the fire themselves. They were out fighting fires to protect their homes. They were humans that also suffered this tragedy.
- HECO flew me to Hilo (Kathy's home) to provide a support group for their staff there who had flown over to help after the fires. They were the most vulnerable because they had had a chance to breathe, they were not in it anymore like their fellow brothers & sisters on Maui and they were eager to go back to help them.

Partnership with HECO

Hawaiian Electric Company

What worked well

- Felt very revolutionary to have a corporate company allow a free support group during company time and opened the door for future partnerships.
- Insight into what was happening behind the scenes & how first responders were managing the impacts.
- They respected our confidentiality, no one from higher management was in the room with us while we were conducting support group.
- Voluntold, they still showed up
- Company felt very comfortable addressing feelings in a disaster
- It couldn't be avoided, the worst natural disaster in 100 years
- We partnered with Hawaiian Electric Company on Maui & Hilo after one of their employees attended an in-person session. We partnered with them for a total of 8 sessions.

Partnership with HECO

Hawaiian Electric Company

What didn't work

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- They put us in this fancy board conference room: felt intimidating, also made them wonder why they didn't have comfy chairs like that. Too corporate, bad associations with the room.
- Voluntold to come to support group, were not actively coming to share
- If people aren't sharing during check in there isn't very many places a group can go. We started talking about sleep and practicing coping skills. Everyone participated in breathing techniques like cat hisses and bunny breaths, and we built muscle memory around EFT: tapping. We would also go over the Emotional and Physical Responses Following a Disaster. It became more psycho education about surviving a disaster and didn't require them to open up. Meeting them where they are at all the time.
- They came in their working groups: could have either made them vulnerable or put their guard up.
- Kathy & Wholefoods, wearing HECO security tag
- **Lessons Learned:** Have the group once a month and allow employees to take off company time to attend the support group. This encourages them to go because they don't have to work, and it ensures a smooth support group since people are going with the intention to share instead of being voluntold. Need a neutral space: lunchroom, break room, etc.

Paddle Out

Day of Community Healing



- We saw in real time how a disaster can exacerbate mental health conditions.
- We had sign-up sheets for various programs.
- Many people came to ask about available resources
- Water, snacks, fun smelly markers, etc.

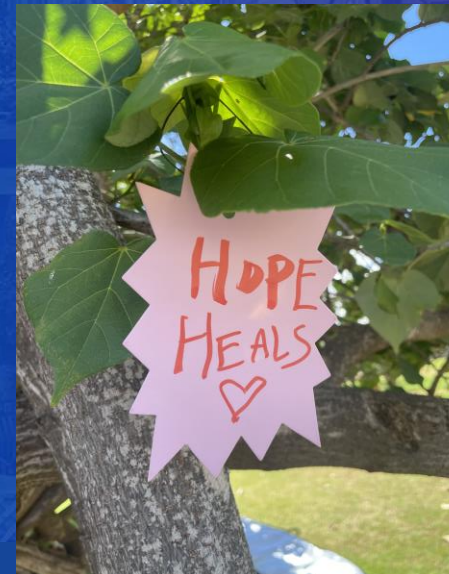
In one particularly moving encounter, we connected with a lady in a manic state. Meeting her at her level, offering a compassionate presence, and providing water allowed her to express herself freely amid tears, word salad, and rapid speech. The transformation in her energy from when she arrived to when she left was remarkable. Later, we spotted her dancing on the dance floor, a poignant testament to the positive shift in her demeanor.

Providing non-judgmental, compassionate, empathetic support can go a long way and can significantly impact individuals.

Our presence was a comfort to many, just knowing that there were people there to support and listen if they needed.

Messages of Hope Activity

- We encouraged participants to express their hopes by writing on speech bubbles, creating a tangible symbol of community resilience—the "Hope Tree."
- Continued Impact: Transformed the individual speech bubbles into a string of hope, now a permanent fixture at support group sessions, fostering an ongoing sense of shared hope & community.



Mentees

Future Facilitators of NAMI Maui Strong Support Group

- Leadership Development: Empowered them to lead and facilitate support groups independently.
- Sustainable Impact: Ensured the sustainability of support group initiatives by fostering local leadership and expertise.
- When people didn't show up it was an opportunity to practice, learn, and train others.
- This model is continually changing. We must adapt to so many things:
 - Location
 - Displacement of attendees
 - Time (conflicts with other things like job, other community meetings)
 - Transportation: a lot of people lost their vehicles to the fire

Impact So Far

- We served 315 individuals total.
- A total of 27 sessions has been conducted to date.
- 23 sessions were conducted in person over 11 days.
- Support groups served 165 people displaced by the fires.
- We served 150 people at the paddle out where we had a resource table and the “Hope Tree.”

In Person Groups		
August 22	9:30 AM	5MHA
	11:30 AM	4MHA
	1:30 PM	3MHA
August 26	10:00 AM	3Online Zoom
August 29	9:30 AM	2MHA
	11:30 AM	5MHA
	1:30 PM	2MHA
September 5	9:00 AM	10Maui HECO
	11:00 AM	8Maui HECO
	2:00 PM	11Maui HECO
September 8 Community Event Paddle out		150NAMI Maui
September 8	7:00 AM	10Maui HECO
	8:30 AM	10Maui HECO
September 12	9:30 AM	8Maui HECO
	11:30 AM	10Maui HECO
September 15	7:00 AM	9Hilo HECO
September 26	9:30 AM	4FSG
	11:30 AM	5MHA
	1:30 PM	10MHA
October 17	9:45 AM	11MHA
	11:30 AM	4MHA
November 21	10:00 AM	4MHA
	12:00 PM	6MHA
December 14	10:30 AM	3MHA
January 31	5:30 PM	3MHA
Feb 28	5:30 PM	7MHA
March 27	5:30 PM	4MHA
April 24	5:30 PM	4MHA

Ongoing Problems

Aftermath of the disaster

- Housing
- Assistance ending or already ended
- FEMA direct leases end in February
- Cleaning up debris
- Rebuild/permitting process
- Elevated living costs
- Continuing loss of local businesses
- Very little venues for musicians
- Failing infrastructure (horrible traffic coming in and out of Lahaina)
- Environmental impacts

What's Next?

NAMI Maui Strong Support Group

- Secured a consistent location, time, & day of the month
- Facilitators to keep it sustainable
- Keep building on messages of hope
- Playing by ear, adapting as we need to
- We are there if and when people need us
- Partnerships with other organizations

The Power of Support Group

Stories from the field

- Come in with anger, leave with laughs
- Bridge to therapy
- Non-judgmental, safe space to cope with heaviness
- Treasuring your co-facilitator
- Sharing available resources & tips and tricks of how to navigate the bureaucracy of assistance programs
- Community building & reconnecting with old neighbors

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THANK YOU!

Special Thank Yous:

- NAMI National for their donation of support for NAMI Maui & NAMI Hawaii
- Kumi Macdonald NAMI Hawaii Executive Director for her wisdom, support, and extra eyes
- Trisha Chaung, NAMI Hawaii Advocacy Manager for her expertise, feedback, resources, and support
- Danielle Bergan from Mental Health America Hawaii on Maui for her courage, vulnerability, and leadership
- Lukas Nelson and Summer Parish who organized a SOHO Sessions
- NAMIWalks Maui
- Hawaii Community Foundation
- Facilitators & Mentees: Nicole & Jenn for always showing up and doing their part
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- And so many others.

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