

Healed People Heal People: A Wounded Healer Model for Addressing Secondary Trauma Among Frontline Violence Prevention Workers

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Abstract

Frontline violence prevention workers are often celebrated for their resilience, yet little attention is given to the emotional toll of their work. These individuals—many of whom are credible messengers and trauma survivors themselves—often serve communities while carrying the weight of unresolved pain. This paper introduces a culturally rooted model for healing the wounded healer, drawing from the groundbreaking work of A.T. Mitchell-Mann and Lakeesha Eure. Through a combination of personal transformation, peer-led healing practices, and leadership development, their framework supports frontline workers in processing secondary trauma, reclaiming their well-being, and leading from a place of wholeness. Based on the “Healed People Heal People” philosophy, this model offers a trauma-informed, community-based solution to burnout, compassion fatigue, and internalized harm. It reframes healing not as a luxury, but as a prerequisite for sustainable leadership and social transformation.

Introduction

Violence prevention workers often stand in the gap between life and death. They interrupt retaliatory shootings, mediate family trauma, and respond to crises long before systems do. Many of these individuals are not trained therapists or clinicians—they are credible messengers, lived-experience leaders, and community healers who have turned their own pain into purpose. But the cost of doing “the work” can be devastating when there is no safe space to process it.

Too often, those who serve others are silently suffering themselves. These wounded healers carry the compounded weight of their own past trauma, the secondary trauma of those they serve, and the systemic violence embedded in under-resourced communities. Without intentional healing spaces, these burdens manifest as burnout, depression, disconnection, and sometimes—despair.

Recognizing this crisis, A.T. Mitchell-Mann and Lakeesha Eure developed 10 Steps to Healing the Wounded Healer—a culturally responsive, trauma-informed leadership model rooted in Black and Brown traditions of community care, storytelling, and spiritual recovery. Their work centers the idea that healing is not only possible but essential for those on the frontlines of violence prevention. This model, now being adopted across the country, reimagines what leadership, self-care, and community restoration can look like when lived experience is honored and healing is prioritized.

This paper explores their model, the lived realities that shaped it, and how it is transforming the culture of violence prevention work by building leaders who are not only equipped—but healed.

Section 2: Background & Context – The Making of the Wounded Healer Model

The Wounded Healer model was not born in a classroom or clinical lab—it was born on the frontlines of urban trauma. It was shaped in hospital waiting rooms after gunshot wounds, community vigils for slain youth, and healing circles held in church basements and prison yards. For A.T. Mitchell-Mann and Lakeesha Eure, this model is deeply personal. It is their story—and the story of thousands of others doing the work of healing while still trying to survive.

A.T. Mitchell-Mann, founder of Man Up! Inc., emerged from the streets of East New York not only as a survivor of violence, but as a trusted leader in the community. Through his organization, he created one of the country's most successful credible messenger programs, mobilizing system-impacted individuals to prevent violence, mediate conflict, and restore hope in neighborhoods long abandoned by traditional institutions. In 2022, his work was recognized citywide when he was appointed co-chair of New York City's Gun Violence Prevention Task Force. But with accolades came increasing demands—and a quiet realization: the very people preventing trauma were being retraumatized.

At the same time in Newark, New Jersey, Lakeesha Eure was building one of the nation's most innovative models for public safety. A Licensed Clinical Social Worker and seasoned community healer, she became the founding Director of Newark's Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery and now serves as the city's Deputy Mayor for Public Safety. Through her leadership, Newark has shifted from a law-enforcement-only model to one grounded in healing-centered engagement, trauma recovery, and wellness. She too recognized a pattern—her most effective staff were often the most emotionally wounded.

Together, Mitchell-Mann and Eure named what so many were feeling but had no language for: that the people saving lives were often too broken to save their own. That credible messengers—while powerful—were often treated as tools, not as whole people. And that burnout was not a side effect of the work—it was built into the system.

Their collaboration led to the development of 10 Steps to Healing the Wounded Healer, a framework grounded in cultural healing practices, peer mentorship, emotional literacy, and spirituality. It was built for the warrior—for the one who shows up for everyone but is never given the space to heal themselves.

This section of the paper lays the groundwork for understanding how lived experience, cultural identity, and systemic neglect converge to make healing an urgent need—not only for communities, but for those leading them.

Section 3: Overview of the 10 Steps to Healing the Wounded Healer Model

The 10 Steps to Healing the Wounded Healer model is not just a curriculum—it is a sacred journey of self-restoration designed for those who lead from the trenches. Co-created by A.T. Mitchell-Mann and Lakeesha Eure, this trauma-informed framework centers the lived experiences of credible messengers, violence interrupters, and frontline workers who carry the invisible weight of personal and secondary trauma.

What makes this model revolutionary is that it blends professional development with personal restoration. It does not require participants to leave their culture, pain, or story at the door. Instead, it invites them to bring their full selves into a healing process grounded in emotional literacy, spiritual wellness, and cultural affirmation. The steps are not rigid—they are reflective. Each one guides participants to peel back the layers of burnout, hypervigilance, and internalized harm that too often come with the work.

Here is an overview of the 10 steps that form the foundation of this healing-centered model:

1. Acknowledgment: Recognizing the Wound

Healing begins with truth-telling. This step invites participants to acknowledge their personal trauma and the secondary trauma absorbed through the work. It opens the door to self-compassion by naming the emotional toll often left unspoken.

2. Self-Awareness and Emotional Accountability

In this step, participants are challenged to reflect on how unresolved trauma may be shaping their decisions, relationships, and leadership style. Emotional accountability becomes a bridge from survival mode to conscious healing.

3. Healing Circles and Peer Support

Healing doesn't happen in isolation. This step introduces peer-led healing spaces where participants are seen, heard, and held in community. Through vulnerability and shared experience, a sense of collective restoration begins.

4. Purpose-Driven Healing

Reconnecting to one's purpose is the heartbeat of this step. Participants explore

their “why” and learn how aligning with purpose fuels resilience. When trauma is processed through the lens of meaning, pain transforms into power.

5. Daily Self-Care Practices

Sustainability is the goal here. This step equips participants with tools for everyday wellness—mindfulness, prayer, journaling, movement, and rest. It reframes self-care as an act of survival, not luxury.

6. Forgiveness and Letting Go

In this spiritual release, participants begin the process of forgiving themselves and others. Letting go of shame, guilt, and resentment becomes the gateway to emotional freedom and inner peace.

7. Setting Boundaries for Long-Term Health

This step affirms the power of saying “no.” Participants examine the ways they’ve overextended themselves and learn to establish boundaries that protect their emotional safety and preserve their energy.

8. Leadership as a Path to Healing

This step redefines leadership through the lens of healing. Participants are encouraged to lead with vulnerability, empathy, and transparency—modeling wellness and emotional integrity for those they serve.

9. Continuous Healing

Healing is not a moment; it’s a practice. This step emphasizes lifelong commitment to self-work, encouraging the integration of therapy, spiritual care, and community support as ongoing tools for transformation.

10. Passing the Torch: Teaching Healing to Others

The final step is the call to legacy. Participants are guided to mentor others, facilitate healing spaces, and build community rooted in restoration. Their story becomes someone else’s survival guide.

Each step is accompanied by guided exercises, reflective journaling, storytelling prompts, and community-based rituals. Participants are never rushed—they are met where they are and move at the speed of trust. The curriculum holds space for cultural nuance, spiritual grounding, and emotional transparency—offering not just healing, but wholeness.

At its core, 10 Steps to Healing the Wounded Healer is a radical act of love for the people who carry their communities on their backs. It affirms what many have never been told: you don't have to be broken to be strong, and you don't have to heal alone.

Section 4: Case Studies and Community Impact

The strength of the Wounded Healer model lies not just in its theory, but in its practice—and the lives it has changed. Across New York and New Jersey, this framework has reached hundreds of credible messengers, frontline workers, and violence prevention leaders, many of whom never had a space to confront their own pain before entering this work.

The impact of this model is perhaps best illustrated through the real-world experiences of those who have participated in it:

Case Study 1: From Street Soldier to Spiritual Shepherd – A.T. Mitchell-Mann

As the founder and CEO of Man Up! Inc., A.T. Mitchell-Mann built a nationally recognized violence prevention model in East New York. But behind the accolades was a man carrying the weight of unspeakable trauma. During the early stages of the pandemic, A.T. found himself holding space for others—while slowly losing himself. It was in the creation of this curriculum that he began his own deep healing journey. He stepped back from constant grind culture and now leads not just as a visionary—but as a vessel of healing.

Case Study 2: Healing in City Hall – Lakeesha Eure

As Newark's founding Director of the Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery, Lakeesha Eure built a public safety model grounded in healing. She realized that her most effective staff were also the most emotionally wounded. The Wounded Healer model became embedded in staff trainings, transforming how Newark supported its violence prevention workers.

Case Study 3: From Client to Coach

One program graduate, once incarcerated and battling addiction, joined the Wounded Healer program while serving as a peer mentor. He found tools to manage his emotional triggers and permission to set boundaries. Today, he is a certified facilitator delivering workshops in schools and jails, serving as a testament to the power of lived experience.

Community Impact Highlights:

- Over 300 frontline workers trained across five cities
- Reduced burnout rates and improved retention in high-turnover roles
- Integration into city contracts, training academies, and public institutions
- Launch of the Healing the Frontline Conference, a national gathering for credible messengers

This model doesn't just help individuals. It reshapes how organizations think about care and transforms community leaders into instruments of restoration.

Section 5: Scaling, Training, and Institutional Adoption

As the mental health crisis deepens across the nation—especially in urban communities impacted by violence and systemic neglect—the need for culturally grounded, trauma-informed leadership is no longer optional. It is urgent. The Wounded Healer model has emerged as a timely and transformational solution, not just for individual wellness, but for organizational and systemic change.

After its successful pilot in New York and New Jersey, the 10 Steps to Healing the Wounded Healer framework was formally adopted into several city initiatives, nonprofit organizations, and grassroots programs. What began as an internal healing process for two leaders has now become a nationally requested training and certification program facilitated by the Institute for Research for Social Justice and Action (IRSJA).

Training and Certification:

Participants in the Wounded Healer program complete a structured cohort model that includes:

- Guided readings and discussions from the official workbook
- Weekly healing circles with trained facilitators
- Journaling, storytelling, and personal reflection activities
- A final personal healing presentation and group reflection

Graduates receive certification as Trauma-Informed Peer Healing Practitioners and are eligible to co-facilitate trainings and serve as national healing ambassadors.

Adoption by Public Agencies:

- Newark's Office of Violence Prevention and Trauma Recovery
- East Orange's Summer Work Experience Program (SWEP)
- Community organizations in New York City, Atlantic City, and Birmingham
- IRSJA's Communiversity platform for national digital access

Training the Trainers:

A key component of the model is sustainability. Graduates of the program are trained not only to heal—but to teach. Through IRSJA's national tour and digital certification track, healers become educators, and their stories become tools for transformation.

A Cultural Shift in Leadership:

Organizations that adopt the model report lower burnout rates, increased team cohesion, and a more compassionate leadership culture. This is not just professional development—this is structural healing. One that begins from the inside out.

Section 6: Conclusion and Call to Action

The frontline of public safety is changing. It no longer belongs solely to those with badges or advanced degrees. It belongs to the mothers who've buried their children and still show up to mentor. It belongs to the returning citizens who transformed their pain into peace. It belongs to the street soldiers turned spiritual guides—leaders who embody the essence of the wounded healer.

The Healed People Heal People model is more than a slogan—it is a testimony. A roadmap. A movement. In the era of burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue, A.T. Mitchell-Mann and Lakeesha Eure dared to ask the most radical question in healing work: What if we prioritized the healer?

Their 10-step model doesn't just help individuals recover from trauma—it rebuilds trust in systems, reshapes how we lead, and redefines what care looks like in community. It gives name to the silent suffering that has long plagued credible messengers, case workers, community leaders, and justice-impacted professionals. It offers tools to unpack that pain, and language to transform it into leadership.

But this work can't stop with a single cohort or city. It's time for every organization, agency, and system that relies on lived-experience leadership to take responsibility—not just for the services it provides, but for the humans providing them. Healing must be written into policy. Reflection must be funded as rigorously as output. And every credible messenger, every violence interrupter, every outreach worker, must know this: Your healing matters too.

The Institute for Research for Social Justice and Action (IRSJA) is committed to expanding this model nationally. Through in-person retreats, virtual training cohorts, and digital certification via Communiversity, the Wounded Healer curriculum is being used to create an entire workforce of emotionally grounded, spiritually aligned, culturally rooted changemakers.

Because the truth is, we don't need more heroes. We need more healers.

And if we want the next generation to live differently—we must first teach the current generation how to heal.

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