



## Build mental wellness and resilience now for the wildfire and future climate disasters

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The horrific wildfire in the McKenzie Valley has caused injuries and deaths, destroyed homes and personal valuables, killed domestic and wild animals and damaged businesses. Its suffocating smoke has generated physical health risks countywide. And many people are heartbroken about the devastation to the beautiful area and small towns they love to visit and recreate in.

Until now, our region has mostly avoided this type of major disaster. But it was only a matter of time before it happened. A disrupted global climate system has raised temperatures, altered regional weather patterns and generated droughts that dried out forests and soils, severely stressed and killed trees and created conditions ripe for catastrophic wildfires.

Lane County is now a frontline territory for climate impacts.

Food, water, shelter and other basic necessities must be provided to those directly impacted by the wildfires. It is also important to offer psychological first aid to people who have been so traumatized that they cannot function or are at risk of harming themselves or others.

However, the most serious psychological, emotional and behavioral problems resulting from a disaster like the wildfire typically occur months or years after it ends. As the tremendous outpouring of help offered by community members shows, strangers typically come together during a disaster like the wildfire to provide resources and support. This is called the “honeymoon phase” of an emergency, and it can last for weeks or a month or so. The outpouring of assistance helps to minimize post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health problems as well as psychosocial problems such as alcohol and drug abuse.

After the wildfire is controlled and the public returns to their everyday lives, some people directly impacted by the fire will undoubtedly experience serious psychological, emotional or behavioral problems as they struggle, on their own, to put their lives back together. This is called the “disillusionment phase” of a disaster, and can last for three to six months, or even years. The result can be severe anxiety, depression, PTSD, complicated grief, hopelessness and other mental health problems. It can also cause parents to neglect or abuse their children and produce adverse childhood experiences, crime, violence and other psychosocial problems.

So in addition to providing immediate assistance to those impacted by the wildfire, long term psychosocial supports will be needed. While important, individually-focused therapy will likely not be sufficient to address the scale of the mental health and psychosocial problems that emerge during the disillusionment phase of the wildfire. That’s because the impacts are occurring in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated social isolation and economic strains that, on their own, are very distressing.

Further, numerous recent assessments have pointed out that the unprecedented wildfires are just one of many harmful impacts speeding our way due to the climate emergency. And, to reduce the effects to manageable levels, rapid and often stressful changes will be needed in numerous individual, community, economic and societal practices and policies.

So in addition to providing immediate and long-term support to those directly impacted by the wildfires, it is also essential to begin now to prepare all Lane County residents for the individual and collective traumas to come that result from accelerating climate impacts as well as the stress pileups associated with the changes required to minimize the climate emergency.

Our region should get out front of these looming problems now. Extensive review of initiatives in the U.S. and the world that prevent and heal individual and collective traumas shows that the most effective approach is to organize community leaders into what can be called a “resilience coordinating council” (RCC).

The goal of an RCC is to “bring the entire system together” — people representing every population and sector of a community or region — to collaboratively plan and implement age, gender and culturally appropriate activities to enhance the capacity of every resident to prevent and heal mental health and psychosocial problems.

This is not a mental health treatment program. Rather than pathologizing people and treating symptoms with single-person therapy, an RCC would teach everyone important information and skills, build individual and group strengths and promote social norms that establish a local culture of mental wellness and resilience for all types of disasters and emergencies.

To accomplish this, members of a RCC should include grassroots leaders from marginalized groups, as well as neighborhood, faith and spirituality and K-12 and higher education professionals. Leaders of volunteer and civic organizations, social justice, public health, emergency response, food, water and shelter providers; police and government should also be actively involved.

All of the activities offered by the RCC should be delivered in just and equitable ways, and should focus on both “presencing” and “purposing” information and skills.

Presencing skills are simple ways for people to calm their body, mind and emotions when distressed to enable wise and skillful decision-making. This includes helping everyone become trauma informed by explaining how their body and mind naturally activates fight, flight or freeze reactions when they sense a threat. Presencing also includes self-administrable body-based, breath-based and thought-based skills as well as enhanced social connections that enable people to self-regulate their nervous system. Teaching people six-second breathing, for example, can strengthen their capacity for self-regulation.

Purposing skills are simple methods to find meaning, direction and hope in the midst of ongoing emergencies. They include methods to turn toward and learn from the adversities, clarify the core values one wants to live by and finding a purpose to engage in. Helping other people, caring for pets and animals and restoring the natural environment are some of the most powerful ways to accomplish this. Local residents will benefit, for example, by learning how they can increase their own sense of wellbeing by rising above their own personal needs to engage in a pro-social activity.

The individual and collective traumas generated by the McKenzie wildfire, pandemic and coming future emergencies underscore that now is the time to organize RCCs countywide. Not only will they protect everyone’s health, safety and security, they will also help people engage more effectively in activities that can reduce climate impacts to manageable levels.

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