

The Register-Guard

Surviving Climate Trauma

By Bob Doppelt

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The injuries, deaths, and destruction of entire communities in the Bahamas caused by Hurricane Dorian will generate multiple forms of psychological and psychosocial traumas. Wildfires, big storms and other disasters could generate similar traumas here in Lane County. Residents need to understand what they involve so they can prepare.

Psychologists often use a three-part framework to describe how humans experience trauma: personal, cultural and intergenerational.

Personal trauma results from an overwhelming shock or stress that shatters an individual's sense of how the world works and their place in it. The blow ravages their psychological and emotional systems and can lead to harmful coping mechanisms.

Cultural trauma results from a horrific event that profoundly alters the collective memory and sense of identity of a group. The 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center is an example of an event that fundamentally altered how Americans view the world and themselves.

Intergenerational trauma can result from personal trauma, such as when adults that were abused or neglected by their parents when they were children inflict similar hurts on their offspring. It can also occur when people are traumatized by racism, misogyny or other systemic oppressions and pass their distress on to the next generation.

Hurricane Dorian is yet more proof that climate trauma must now be added to this list. As described last year in an article by Zhiwa

Woodbury in the journal *Ecopsychology*, it is intensifying all the other traumas and, left unaddressed, will cause far more harm than the other three combined.

Most traumas, for example, are caused by events that end, which allows time for recovery. As temperatures continue to rise, the disasters and toxic stresses generated by climate disruption will be never ending, allowing little to no time for healing.

Similarly, although a single traumatic event can leave long lasting psychological scars, even more detrimental to the human psyche are repetitive traumas. As climate disruption worsens, the resulting disasters and toxic stresses will become chronic, producing more and more personal, cultural and intergenerational traumas.

In addition, traumatic events knowingly caused by humans, such as violence, are typically much harder for people to cope with than accidents or natural disasters. But today's climate-driven disasters are not "natural." They result from human actions, and in particular the deeds of fossil-fuel executives who have long known their products are harmful but torpedo solutions anyway, and by all levels of government that know the science but fail to enact laws to protect us. The anger that results as people realize this will make healing extremely difficult.

Further, while the other forms of trauma affect individuals, families or groups, climate disruption threatens all of humanity. Indeed, without dramatic changes, our species is facing the most horrific event imaginable: the end of civilization as we know it. This recognition will generate personal traumas that profoundly impact groups and future generations.

Survival research has found that coping and healing in the midst of repeated trauma requires seeing conditions clearly and staying calm. It's about finding new meaning, purpose and hope by engaging in activities that increase safety, health and well-being. Building these capacities should become a top local priority.

Bob Doppelt directs The Resource Innovation Group and writes a monthly column for The Register-Guard on climate change-related issues.