**BOB DOPPELT**

**To lower crime, learn trauma coping skills**

**By Bob Doppelt**

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Eugene Police have recently been accused of unjustly using deadly force against military veteran Brian Babb, and of using unreasonable force on the sister of Eric Richardson, president of the local NAACP. Data derived from the FBI’s 2013 uniform crime reports said the overall crime rate in Eugene is 53 percent higher than the Oregon mean, and 69 percent higher than the national mean.

There may be a common thread: trauma. Dealing with the effects of trauma might improve overall local well-being. It might also help the community prepare for the traumatic effects of climate disruption.

Neuroscientists have found that when humans sense a threat — whether it is physical danger or a challenge to our self-esteem — neurochemicals create a state of hyperarousal aimed at preparing us to fight back, flee or freeze.

Most people are able to calm themselves and release the hyperarousal. However, people who experienced significant trauma in childhood, or who face severe or ongoing traumas in adulthood, can have a difficult time re-regulating themselves.

Unresolved trauma leads to serious problems of physical and mental health. It can also cause people to adopt self-­destructive coping behaviors such as drug, food or alcohol abuse, or to focus their distress on others through aggression, crime or violence.

Trauma is particularly damaging in childhood. Oregon Health Authority data show that 32 percent of Oregonians said they grew up with parents who abused drugs or alcohol, 30 percent said they were verbally abused, and 20 percent said they were physically abused.

Children who experience abuse typically have difficulty learning because their internal resources are focused on self-protection. When they become adults they tend to have more drug, alcohol, and tobacco problems, are at greater risk of disease, and show higher rates of depression, suicide and other mental health problems.

Adults who experience severe trauma, as Babb apparently did in Afghanistan, and as people of color do when they suffer persistent racism and oppression, can also be profoundly affected.

The bottom line is that severe or persistent traumas are extremely harmful. Few people understand this. Instead, people who look, think, or act differently are seen as socially deviant, morally weak, losers or outsiders. Many people, especially those who previously experienced or who are currently traumatized, which can include police and other authority figures, often react with contempt or aggression.

It need not be this way. Some communities have begun to realize the role of trauma in shaping local health and well-being. One is Tarpon Springs, Fla. Another is The Dalles here in Oregon.

Tarpon Springs, a Gulf Coast town of 24,000, had for years experienced high levels of child abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse, crime and violence. Robin Saenger, who in 2010 was a city commissioner and vice-mayor, told me that she kept wondering, “Why is nothing changing?” After speaking with a consultant from the National Center for Trauma-Informed Care, she finally understood the problem: It was trauma.

Saenger organized Peace4Tarpon, which seeks to make Tarpon Springs “the first trauma-informed community in the U.S.” by increasing awareness, and promoting building individual and group resilience. The local housing authority, for instance, launched a program called “Why Are You Yelling At Me When I’m Only Trying to Help You?” that trained staff members to assist people who have experienced trauma.

Last year Tarpon Springs was selected as a finalist in the 2014 All-American City Award hosted by the National Civic League in large part because of Peace4Tarpon.

The Dalles has experienced a similar change through its Creating Sanctuary Program. Community leaders realized that trauma “was the great equalizer impacting everyone: individuals, organizations, and the entire community,” according to Trudy Townsend, who coordinates the program. The program offers a pathway for organizations and the community to shift from a “trauma-organized” to a “trauma-informed” culture.

Perhaps the most visible sign of progress is that in 2014, The Dalles was named No. 1 on a list of the Ten Best Cities to Live in Oregon.

Becoming a trauma-informed community won’t resolve the historic roots of racism or eliminate all sources of trauma. However, many of the social problems faced by communities in Lane County might be addressed by launching initiatives similar to Peace4Tarpon and Creating Sanctuary in The Dalles.

This type of community-wide effort might also prepare residents for the adversity coming our way produced by more frequent and intense storms, droughts, heat waves, wildfires and other events associated with rising global temperatures.

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