

# The Register-Guard

## Lessons From Resilience Work

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By Bob Doppelt

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In recent columns, I have described takeaways from my work coordinating a global network of mental health and other professionals called the International Transformational Resilience Coalition. We help individuals and groups build resilience to cope with — and respond constructively to — climate traumas.

A woman who narrowly escaped last year's massive wildfire in Paradise, California, told me, "I never worried about climate change because fires happen all the time around here. But I never thought things would get so bad that our entire town could burn, or that my children and I would barely get out alive. I was living in a dreamlike state."

After learning resilience skills, she said, "Resilience training has made a big difference in my life. I now see how restricted my views were and have learned how to calm myself when stressed and see what is actually happening. I am making better decisions now, and have decided to help children with these issues."

Some members of the ITRC work in nations devastated by climate disasters. Others work domestically building resilience for adverse childhood experiences and other traumas produced by climate impacts. Everywhere, our members see accelerating mental health problems like severe anxiety, depression grief and psycho-social-spiritual disorders including child abuse, drug and alcohol addiction and even violence.

These issues have largely been ignored. Most climate professionals emphasize technological solutions and believe the psychological pains people experience from climate impacts are someone else's responsibility.

Similarly, many social service professionals believe climate traumas are an environmental issue that falls outside their purview. When the issues are addressed, disaster mental health is the focus. While important, this alone is woefully insufficient.

One conclusion from our work is unless prevention becomes a top priority, the failure to address the human dimensions of the climate crisis will impair children, families, and communities everywhere. It'll make climate solutions more difficult to implement.

Another conclusion is that resilience is both an individual and group endeavor.

At the personal level, resilience involves understanding how traumatic stress affects our mind, body, behavior and simple ways to calm ourselves when distressed. This helps us avoid tunnel vision, see things clearly and make wise and skillful decisions. The most resilient individuals also are able to use adversities as catalysts to find new meaning and purpose in life.

It can be difficult for individuals to make good decisions, however, when the norms that dominate the groups they associated with promote harmful thinking and behaviors. When social narratives foster personally, socially and ecologically healthy responses, people will choose that path.

The U.N. inter-agency standing committee on mental health and psychosocial support in emergency settings requires coordinating groups to be established after disasters. With climate calamities now possible anywhere at any time, communities in Lane County and globally will benefit by organizing groups to coordinate efforts to build a culture of resilience before disasters occur.

Perhaps the most important insight from our work is that building human resilience can help people cope constructively with many traumas, not just climate disasters. In this time of growing peril, it should be a top priority.

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